UNESCO the Courier

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March 1999

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Armadou Kourouma: an African novelist's inside story

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Contents

March 1999

PEOPLE AND PLACES

3 **United States: Rallying to a new beat** — Photos by Stephen Shames

EDITORIAL

9 **Myths and illusions** — Federico Mayor

PLANET

10 **Nuclear decommissioning: a problem that won't go away** — Nicholas Lenssen

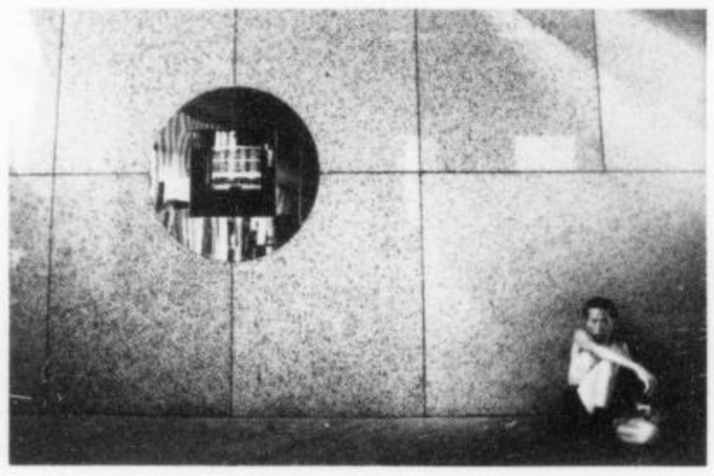
WORLD OF LEARNING

14 **Chicanos paint their way back** — Annick Tréguer

DOSSIER

17 A **new** deal for the poor

John Kohut, Mirel Bran, Andreas Harsono, Christian Lionet, Valentin Simeon Zinga



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18 'Human development' (world map)

20 The final and optimal crisis of the century — Rubens Ricupero

1. The markets

23 A fickle friend — Andreas Harsono

25 Mali: growth without development — Sophie Boukhari

26 Chile's two-track therapy — Eduardo Olivares

2. The state

27 USA: the self-help gospel — Vicky Elliott

28 Twilight in Tunisia — Sophie Boukhari

30 In the former Eastern bloc, a hazardous transition — Omar Noman

3. The people

32 Culture—the wild card — Ramesh Singh

34 ATD's streetwise librarians — Martine Jacot

35 Madagascar: a waning tradition — Soahangy Mamisoa Rangers

36 Another lost decade? — Thierry Lemaresquier and Mümtaz Keklik

ETHICS

37 **Genetic weapons: a 21st-century nightmare?** — Ethirajan Anbarasan

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

40 **Tracking down looted art** — Lucía Iglesias Kuntz

CONNEXIONS

43 **ONE intelligent island** — Malini Rajendran

Talking to...

46 **Ahmadou Kourouma, an African novelist's inside story**

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United States

Rallying to a **new** beat

Photos by Stephen Shames

© Stephen Shames/Matrix, New York

PARADING FOR HOPE. **Focus: Hope, a movement created in Detroit in the aftermath of the city's 1967 race riots, holds an annual eight-mile walk for justice which brings people together on the birthday of deceased black rights leader Martin Luther King Jr to demonstrate their commitment to interracial harmony. The movement is working to rebuild the manufacturing base of inner-city Detroit, and runs a Center for Advanced Technologies (CAT) in partnership with six universities and industrial partners including Ford and General Motors.**

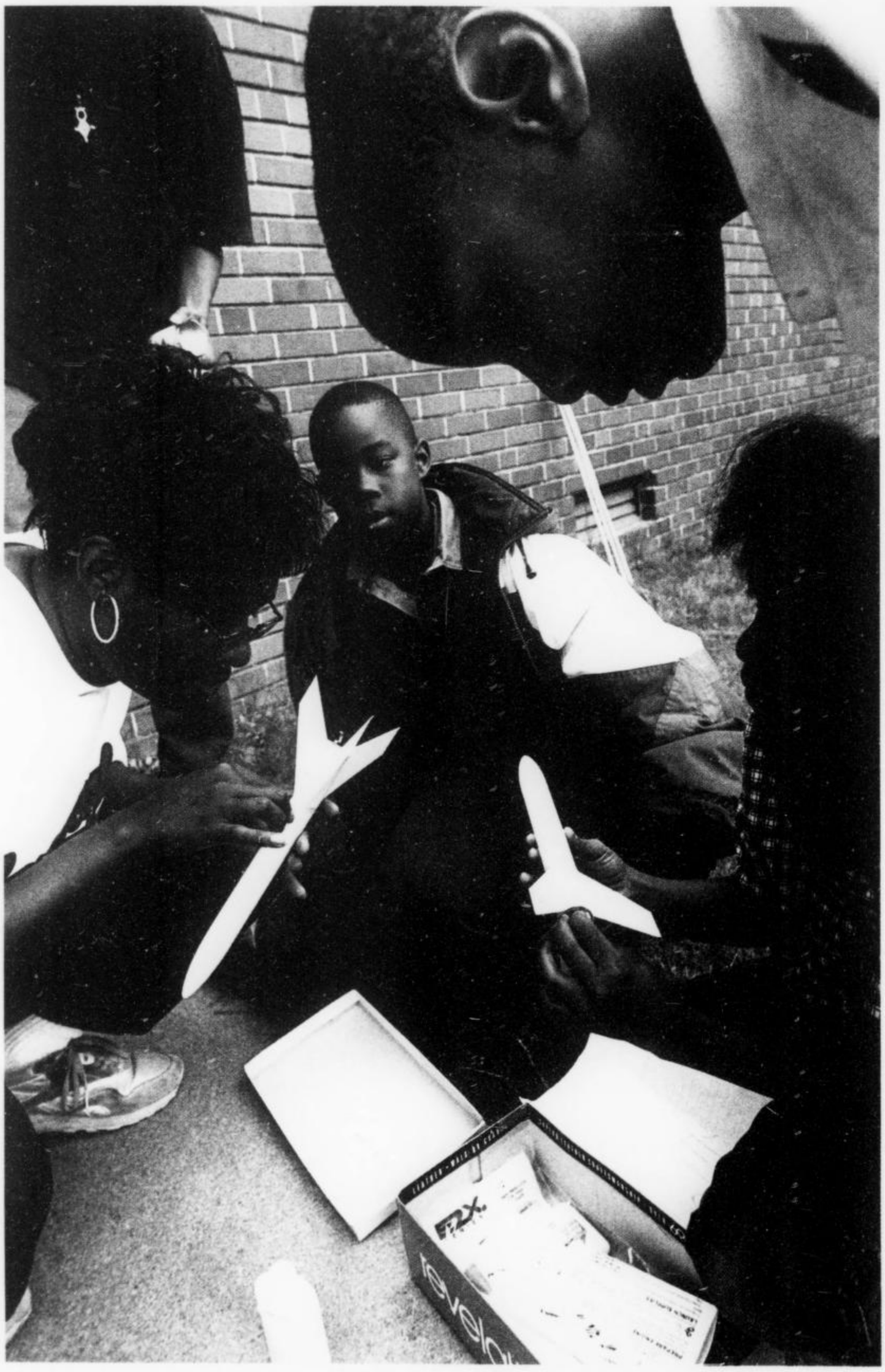
The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of profound changes in family structures in the United States. As the population became more mobile, many parents raised children without support from the extended family. Divorce rates rose, and so did the numbers of children raised in single-parent households and/or by parents working outside the home. In the 1970s few mothers of infants worked outside the home; now more than half do.

Today a quarter of American families with children under age three live in poverty. Most of them are headed by one parent, usually the mother, and many live in unsafe neighbourhoods with poor access to quality child care and health services. To help ease the plight of these families, hundreds of grassroots family support programmes have sprouted across the United States over the last 25 years, coalescing into a movement of growing size and complexity.

The activities of a handful of these community-based schemes are illustrated on these pages. All of them are locally run, with the participation of volunteers. They encourage education and the work ethic, promote economic development, rehabilitate housing and fight crime. Many of them work closely with local religious institutions, and most are involved with the local school—backing up teachers in the classroom, providing after-school care, organizing summer programmes, and making sure students get to school safely. ▶

The photos are a small selection of many taken over a three-year period by photojournalist Stephen Shames, who travelled through 15 States and the District of Columbia meeting disadvantaged families and reporting on how they are being helped to triumph over terrible odds to stay together and become self-reliant. In 1997 they were published in a book by the Family Resource Coalition of America*. ■

* *Pursuing the Dream: What Helps Children and Their Families Succeed*, by Stephen Shames (photographer) and Kathy Goetz Wolf, Family Resource Coalition of America, 1997.



Photos © Stephen Shames/Matrix, New York

PREPARING FOR LIFT-OFF. These elementary school students in Denver, Colorado, are members of a Rocket Club sponsored by the US National Society of Black Engineers, a college and university student organization. Their school is one of several Family Resource Schools in Denver which are open after school hours and on weekends as community centres offering adult basic education, parenting education and family support services.

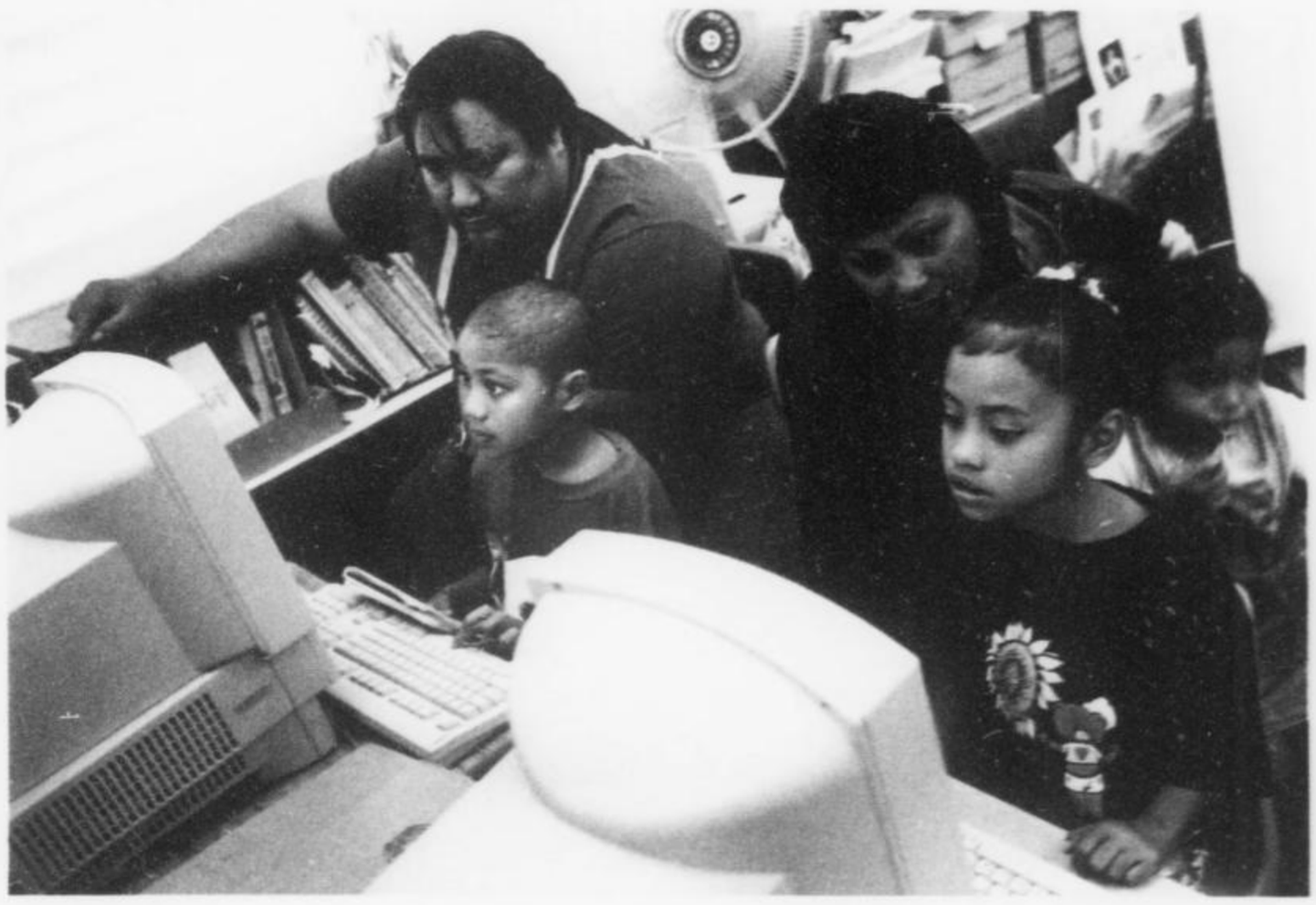
AMERICAN GRAFFITI. **Roy Panton paints over graffiti on Third Street, Los Angeles. He is a member of Bresee Youth Center, an after-school centre for youths aged 11-18, which has a contract with the city to paint out graffiti in an area with the highest gang-related crime rate in Los Angeles and few parks or recreational facilities. One thousand kids from central LA participate, two-thirds of them boys. Fifty-five per cent are African-American, 42 per cent are Latino. The Center employs former graffiti artists in a computer design and desktop publishing business, and other children work distributing flyers, in the computer lab, or at the Center's store. At a homework lab, volunteer mentors and peer tutors help students with reading, writing and math skills.**

- 14% of the US population was living below the poverty line* in 1994
- More than 20% of the aged are income-poor
- 59% of children in income-poor households were in one-parent families (1989-92)
- 4% of the population not expected to survive to age 40 (1990)
- 11% of secondary-school-age children not enrolled in school (1993-95)
- Real per capita GDP of poorest 20% of population (1980-94): $5,800
- Real per capita GDP of richest 20% of population (1980-94): $51,705

* $14.40 (1985 purchasing power parity) a day per person

Source: UNDP

FRIENDS IN NEED. **Friends of the Children searches out abused, neglected and violent youth in Portland, Oregon, and gives them committed, full-time mentor "aunts" and "uncles" from their own community. Each child spends at least five hours a week with his or her Friend, going to the park or the mall, getting help with homework, learning about personal hygiene. A Friend is a constant in the child's life, which otherwise may be full of upheaval. Above, during basketball practice, T.R. hangs on to Friends of the Children volunteer Zach Harris.**



Photos © Stephen Shames/Matrix, New York

WHEN PARENTS BECOME PUPILS. **At Linapuni Elementary School in Honolulu, Hawaii, parents Taeotafe Melei and Anna Tauala watch their first-grade children show them how to work on computers in their school's computer lab. They are involved in the Parents and Children Together (PACT) youth centre located at a housing project that was notorious for gang activity and drugs until PACT and community residents, with the help of police and the housing authority, got together to do something about it. They set up a Parent-Child Center to teach parenting skills, loaned money to and trained residents to start businesses and set up a neighbourhood patrol and the youth centre to keep teens and pre-teens out of trouble.**

POP CULTURE. **Luz Martinez disciplines his son, Carlos (left and opposite page). They have been counselled by Avance, a parenting programme working in public housing projects and schools all over Texas. Avance, which was started in 1970 by teacher Gloria Rodriguez, encourages parents to use consistent discipline by communicating with their children rather than blowing up in anger and hitting them.**

Photos © Stephen Shames/Matrix, New York

STRONG, SMART, AND BOLD. **Girls, Inc. is a national organization dedicated to helping girls aged 9 to 18 to avoid early sexual activity and pregnancy and become "strong, smart, and bold". Its programme teaches assertiveness (how to say "no" and remain popular) through role playing. Above, in an after-school talk group for middle school girls in Orange County, California, 13-year-old Kristine receives support from other girls after revealing some things that are troubling her. This supportive environment, in a neighbourhood where gang members regularly accost and grope girls on their way to school, is run by a professionally trained adult. More than half the girls served through Girls, Inc.'s 750 national affiliates are from single-parent, low-income families.**

A TIMELY HAND. **In Brooklyn, New York, the Bedford Stuyvesant Volunteer Ambulance Corps has cut response time to three minutes and trained over 100 people as paramedics. Here, an ambulanceman helps a man who was hit on the head with a chair during a street fight.**

EDITORIAL

Myths and illusions

UNESCO/Ines Forbes

Federico Mayor

The tide of precarity is rising steadily, so that people who have never been poor no longer regard poverty as a distant prospect but as one so close that it could engulf them at any moment

In 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall was rightly welcomed because it marked the collapse of a system that provided a degree of equality but rejected freedom. Today there is a strong possibility that the system gradually spreading all over the world—a kind of neo-liberal fundamentalism—may also collapse. In its obsession with freedom, vital though freedom is, this fundamentalism disregards equality, a term which should not be regarded here in purely static and statistical terms, but as something dynamic and ethical. Equality can only be truly practised in a context of social solidarity or—to borrow from the vocabulary of the French Revolution—of fraternity.

On the one hand, we have a world that is immensely rich in resources, possibilities, knowledge and experience; its constituent societies are freer and more dynamic than ever. There is an extraordinary potential for everyone to live a better life. But at the same time, new and ever higher walls are being built both between peoples and between social groups within individual countries. We are experiencing a travesty of development, which is creating a world bipolarized into extremes of wealth and poverty.

The most common reactions to this disastrous situation are very often the result of two misapprehensions. The first can only be described as ideological or doctrinaire since it is not based on the facts as they can be observed. It says that since the dominant system of values and things is by definition more than satisfactory, the persistence of impoverishment is merely a temporary blip. Enough time has elapsed, however, for us to see that this is not the case, including in countries where this system has been part of the established order for more than a century. One statistic is particularly eloquent. In just over 30 years, world production has approximately doubled, but the gap has more than doubled between the income of the 20 per cent of the world's people living in the richest countries and the income of the world's poorest 20 per cent, according to the United Nations Development Programme.

The second misapprehension stems from another form of blindness and illusion, namely the belief that poverty can be regarded exclusively as a moral issue, as if it had no other kind of implications for those who are not poor. Globalization is, however, a two-way process. It enables the countries of the North to export their values and their paradigms as well as their goods and capital to the countries of the South, but it also makes them much more vulnerable to the backlash of crises that afflict these countries. Even in the North, the cult of competitiveness is undermining situations once considered extremely stable. The tide of precarity is rising steadily, so that people who have never been poor no longer regard poverty as a distant prospect but as one so close that it could engulf them at any moment.

Because of inadequate socio-economic development, the extraordinary upsurge of democracy over the past 30 years remains a very fragile process, and there is a risk that the trend may be reversed. When hunger, disease and ignorance prevail, citizens' participation in decision-making becomes either non-existent or a mere charade. Democratic institutions become empty shells, representational bodies existing in form only and devoid of real significance.

Social divisions caused by economic distortions exacerbate the failures of democracy which in turn pose serious threats to civil order within countries and to peace between nations. It is high time to face these obvious facts. ■

Nuclear a **problem** that

Critics of current waste disposal and power plant dismantling schemes believe that the legacy of nuclear power generation may impoverish and endanger future generations for millennia to come

Imagine traveling a thousand years hence in a landscape with rising concrete domes, shrouded with mystery, forbiddenness, and slowly decaying defences of barbed wire and other barriers. The ruins are guarded by a priesthood that wards off all those who may feel inclined to trespass, warning people of the dangers that lurk within the centre of their shrine. Such may be the future fate of the more than 500 civilian nuclear power reactors built in the second half of the twentieth century.

In nearly all industries, the disposal of antiquated plants and equipment is a straightforward and relatively low-cost operation. But the high levels of radiation present in retired facilities make it extremely complex and costly for nuclear power. Upon final closure, a nuclear power plant is converted from an asset generating electricity that can be sold to energy users, to a concrete and steel mass of radioactive waste awaiting eventual dismantling and isolation from humans and the biosphere. Although it is unlikely that a scenario such as that envisioned above will occur, the fact remains that human societies have yet to determine just what will happen with retired nuclear power plants.

François Chenevier, the director of the French nuclear waste agency, admonished in 1990 that "it would be irresponsible for us to benefit from nuclear power and leave it to later generations to deal with the waste." Yet that situation had already occurred, and will likely continue into the next three or so decades. Although nuclear reactors are expected to operate for between 30 and 40 years, their radioactive legacy—including the physical structure of retired reactors—will remain for thousands of years.

The problem of what to do with shuttered reactors is growing steadily. As of the beginning of 1999, 94 nuclear reactors had been retired. At the same time, only 429 reactors were in operation, meaning that one out of every 5.5 reactors that has ever been built has already been permanently closed.

'It would be irresponsible for us to benefit from nuclear power and leave it to later generations to deal with the waste'

Yet only a handful of these have actually been taken apart.

This lack of progress in decommissioning reactors is partly planned. Some countries, such as Japan and the United States, have announced policies that would have them dismantle closed reactors within a decade or two of closure. Other countries, such as Canada and France, intend to wait several decades. At the extreme, the United Kingdom has decided to wait more than 100 years before finally tearing down any reactors at all. Thus, old reactors could become a near permanent fixture in some countries.

The irony in tearing down nuclear power plants is that the longer they run, the more radioactive their interiors get from neutron bombardment. And the higher the radioactivity, the more difficult, dangerous, and expensive it is to dismantle the plants, and store or bury the residual radioactive waste. Thus, waiting decades or longer between closing reactors and actualiy tearing them down makes the task that much easier and safer to undertake.

* Energy specialist and former Senior Researcher at Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C.-based policy research unit. Portions of this article are drawn from work done by Worldwatch.

Dismantling: the **nuts** and **bolts**

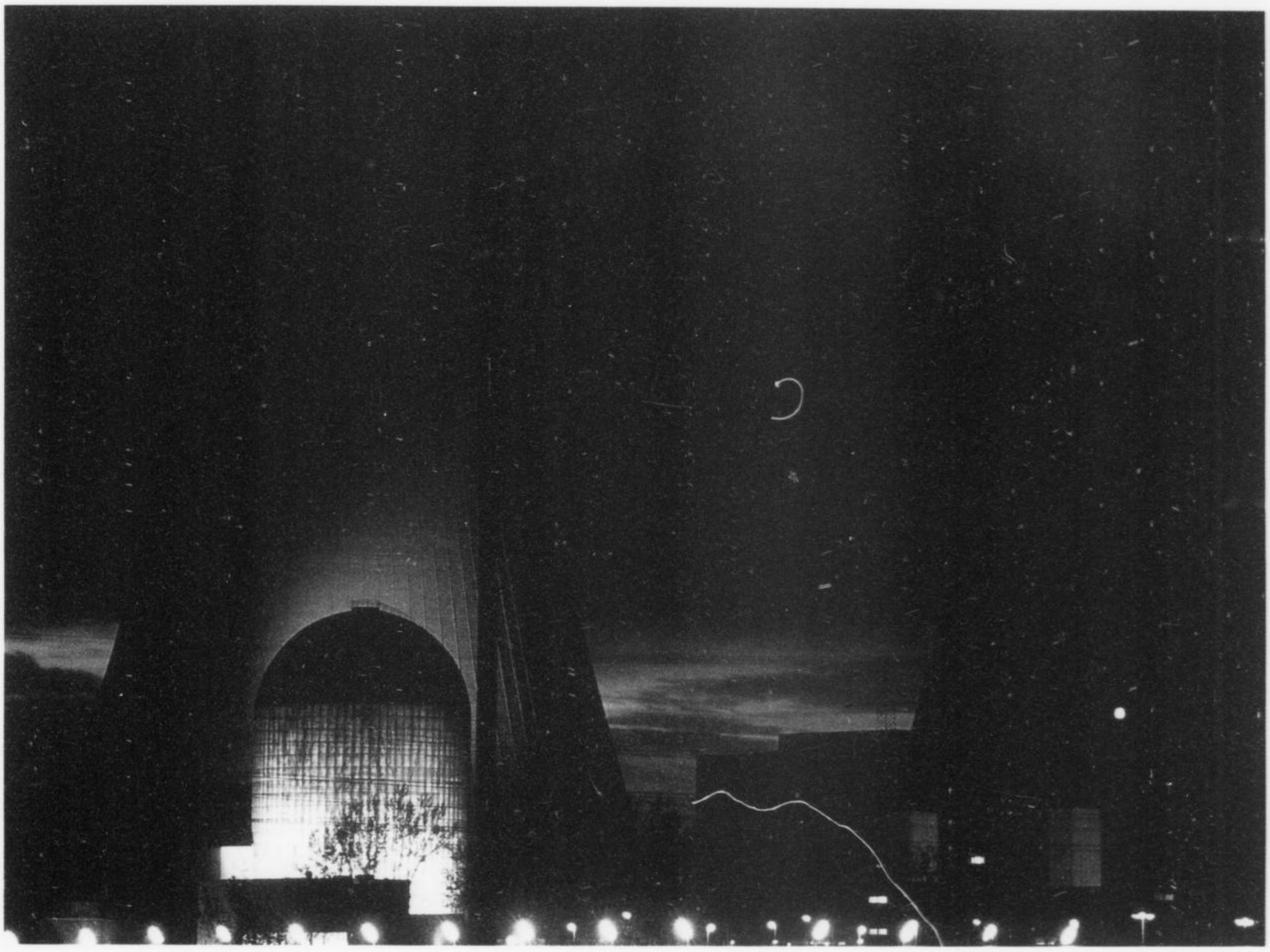
The basic "deconstruction" of a nuclear plant takes place in a three-step process, the guidelines of which have been established by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These phases consist of removing the fuel and auxiliary structures; ensuring safe confinement of remaining radioactive structures and components; and finally taking the plant apart and removing it from the site.

The first job is to empty the reactor core of its fuel and to remove it from the site. In the second phase, all remaining radioactive materials are confined and sealed; the result is sometimes referred to as "safe-store". If left in place for 30 to 100 years, slightly contaminated materials such as metals and concrete will lose much of their radioactivity. The third phase involves removing all elements from the site and making it usable for other purposes.

Because appropriate national infrastructures do not yet exist in many countries, operators have often opted to postpone final dismantling until approved solutions for waste disposal are available. Another reason to opt for deferred dismantling is the cost-benefit (see article). In the case of Britain's Magnox Electric, for example, which has adopted a 135-year safe-storage strategy, the fact that decommissioning costs are discounted over 135 years lightens the company's books today. ■

decommissioning: won't go away

Nicholas Lenssen*



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Gundremmingen nuclear power plant in Bavaria, Germany, during dismantling.

Still, the radioactivity of the actual buildings—particularly the reactor's core vessel in which the nuclear reaction takes place—will last for hundreds of thousands of years. The radioactive substance nickel 59, for example, is found in the reactor's core, an area that has experienced the heavy bombardment of neutrons from fission's chain reactions. Nickel 59 has a radioactive half-life of 80,000 years, meaning that it takes roughly a million years before it is safe. Current plans are to bury the waste, isolating it from humans and the biosphere until it becomes harmless. However, no country has yet taken political action on just where it will bury these materials.

Some scientists assure the public that the problem of radioactive waste can be solved through such burial, although others debate whether it can be "solved" in the normal fashion at all. Waste cannot be destroyed, nor can scientists prove that it will stay out of the biosphere if buried. Proof of a hypothesis, via the scientific method, requires demonstration. Yet with radioactive waste, such proof would require hundreds of human generations and entail extensive risks. Critics, from aboriginal people to scientists, have often noted the presumptuousness of our civilization's willingness to reach forward in time, borrowing from the future that which we can never repay. To leave a legacy that does not merely impoverish future life but may endanger it for millennia to come, constitutes an act of unprecedented irresponsibility.

Ignoring early warnings

Politicians traditionally have been reluctant to tackle an issue that will not come to the forefront until after their political careers have ended. Indeed, both government and industry have long ignored warnings about radioactive wastes, including the problem of decommissioning nuclear power facilities.

In 1951, Harvard University president James B. Conant, former administrator of ▶

the wartime Manhattan Project to develop a nuclear bomb, spoke publicly of wastes that would last for generations. In 1957, a U.S. National Academy of Sciences panel cautioned that "unlike the disposal of any other type of waste, the hazard related to radioactive wastes is so great that no element of doubt should be allowed to exist regarding safety." In 1960, another Academy committee urged that the waste issue be resolved before licensing new nuclear facilities.

Such recommendations fell on deaf ears, and one country after another plunged ahead with building nuclear power plants. Government bureaucrats and industry spokespeople assured the public that decommissioning and nuclear waste could be dealt with, yet few resources were dedicated to these issues. Working with radioactive waste was "not glamorous . . . nobody got brownie points for caring about nuclear waste," according to Carroll Wilson, first general manager of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. So the issue was figuratively, and almost literally, swept under the rug until the late 1970s when safety problems and accidents, questions about health effects, soaring costs, and eroding public confidence slowed reactor construction.

Still, most people probably believe to this day that the problem of dismantling retired reactors and disposing of their wastes is not an issue to be concerned with. That may be true, but even if an engineering or social solution, such as a nuclear priesthood

© Peter Ginter/Bilderberg/Studio X, Paris

A technician wearing protective clothing slices through a wall with a cutting torch.

Nuclear **power** today

Commercial nuclear power has apparently reached its zenith—at least for the current generation. Globally, capacity of nuclear power has increased less than five per cent since 1990, and in 1998 the world's capacity actually declined slightly. Even though global capacity is likely to rise in the next year or two, it will almost certainly decline precipitously in the years following as the construction pipeline dries up, and the closure of older, uneconomic, and politically unpopular reactors accelerates.

By the end of 1998, 429 reactors were operating, one less than five years before. Construction is taking place at 33 new reactors. Of these, seven are likely to be connected to the grid by the year 2001, though another fourteen may never be completed.

Western Europe accounts for 150 operating reactors, though only one new one remains under construction. In fact, West European governments have started addressing the closure of existing reactors, as indicated by the German and Swedish governments' efforts to begin phasing out nuclear energy. Elsewhere, governments—including the French—have started debating reducing their countries' dependence on the atom.

In Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Russia and Ukraine, some 68 reactors are operational, with four being actively worked on. Although many of these countries plan to expand their nuclear industries, they face financial limitations, and public opposition in the face of the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

The Americas account for 123 reactors, though only two—one each in Argentina and Brazil—are under construction. In Canada and the United States, the nuclear industry is under extraordinary economic pressure as reactors are unable to compete economically with other means of providing electricity services.

Asia remains the last stronghold for the nuclear power industry, with 88 reactors operating and 26 under construction, though even here a slowdown is evident. Japan only has two reactors under construction, and South Korea has scaled back its intent due to the twin blows of political changes and economic crisis. Taiwan is building what is recognized by all as the country's final two reactors, and efforts to create commercial nuclear power industries in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam have all failed in recent years.

China currently has the world's most ambitious programme, with a plan to go from the three reactors it operates today to more than 50 by the year 2020. It is probable, though, that China's ambitious plans will fail as they have in every other country when economics, safety, and decommissioning and radioactive waste issues become debated by the public. ■

that will protect the biosphere, is found, there remains a huge, unpaid bill for achieving it.

Despite some early real experience with the cost of decommissioning plants, it still remains uncertain just what those costs will be—and who will pay. Estimates of the dismantling cost have ranged from 10 per cent of the initial capital investment to 40 per cent, and even 100 per cent. This translates into costs ranging from $50 million to more than $3 billion for a large reactor.

Who's going to pay, and how much?

In fact, one smaller reactor, the 167-megawatt Yankee Rowe of Massachusetts, which cost $186 million (1993$) to build in 1960 ended up having a dismantling bill of more than $350 million three decades later. Indeed, if governments and utilities have had a difficult time justifying the cost of building and operating reactors, closing them could be an even harder sell.

In the United Kingdom, the government-owned utility insisted for years that the cost of tearing down redundant plants would be relatively small. Then, in 1989, when the government was in the process of a failed attempt to privatize the country's nuclear industry, the utility admitted that the decommissioning cost was roughly four times that it had previously stated.

Similarly, though most countries require their operators to collect funds for decommissioning during a reactor's operation, most of these funds consist of only "book-keeping" funds. That is, the utility credits a decommissioning fund with money, but the actual cash is spent on other activities. Thus, there is no guarantee that when the utility actually needs the money for decommissioning, it will have it. Yet even with systems that require actual cash reserves to be created shortages can easily mount, if reactors are shut down before the end of their original expected lifespan, as has been more the rule than the exception with the nearly 100 reactors now permanently closed.

In fact, the early retirement costs of reactors in the United States' electricity markets could run to more than $15 billion. In recent years, Sweden's government raised the amount of money utilities need to collect for decommissioning. No one can say for sure just how much it will cost to handle the waste legacy from nuclear power, though so far the estimates continue to climb upward.

In other countries, including France and most developing countries, governments intend to provide public funds to dismantle reactors when the time comes, ensuring that the current generation that uses the power from nuclear plants will pass on to future generations the cost of disposing of them.

In the end, decommissioning could become the largest remaining expense facing the nuclear industry and the governments who have supported it, particularly if efforts to confine radioactive waste fail. Even if no more nuclear waste is created, dealing with existing waste will require attention and investments for a period that defies our usual notion of time. The challenge before human societies is to keep nuclear waste including the actual remnants of shuttered plants in isolation for the many millennia that make up the hazardous life of these materials. In this light, no matter what becomes of nuclear power, the nuclear age will continue for a very long time. ■

With the aid of a claw arm, a worker stores nuclear waste containers behind a protective wall made of lead and concrete.

© Peter Ginter/Bilderberg/Studio X, Paris

Island nations threatened as global warming **kills** coral reefs

Global warming is killing coral reefs and posing a threat to many of the world's island nations, especially in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. A recent study by the U.S-based Global Coral Reef Alliance (GCRA) says that last year's rise in global temperature destroyed most of the coral reefs surrounding the Seychelles archipelago in the Indian Ocean. The colourful reefs, which are part animal and part plant, protect coastlands from erosion, provide a home for many marine fish species and attract tourism. As havens of biodiversity they have been called the rainforests of the ocean. "There is no replacement for dead corals," says Dr Thomas Goreau, President of the GCRA, who headed the study.

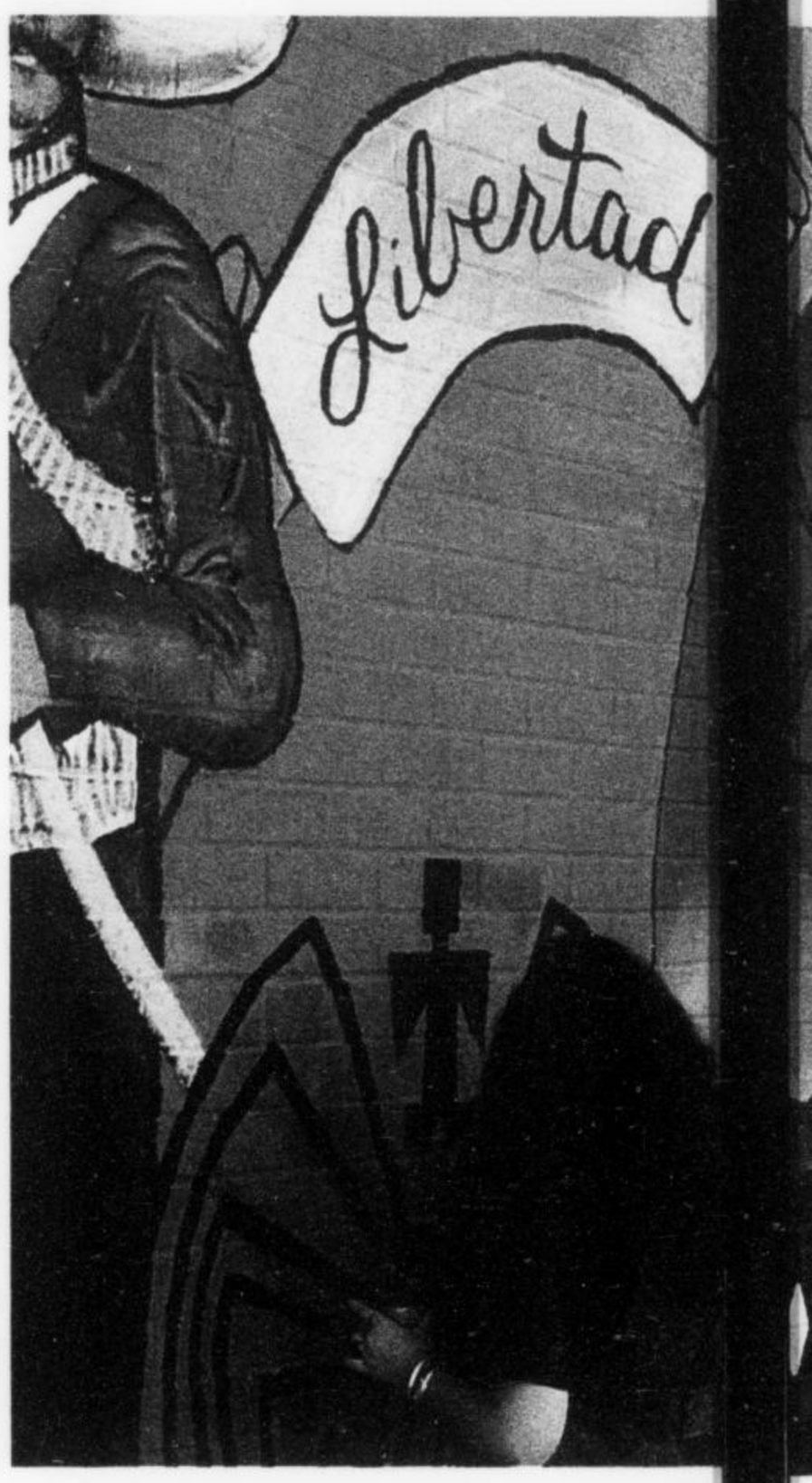
Coral reefs may also be destroyed by events like pollution and hurricanes but such damage is minimal compared to that of global warming.

Scientists say additional heat in the atmosphere, due to an increase in greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, is going into the oceans. When the water temperature goes beyond a certain point, the corals respond by bleaching themselves, expelling the algae that give them colour and provide nutrition. If the warm condition persists for too long, it weakens the coral, sometimes fatally.

Wide-scale bleaching began to be observed in the 1980s but dramatically increased last year, the hottest year of the century. Researchers say abnormally warm conditions persisted in sea water for more than five months in 1998, causing extensive damage to corals around island nations including Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

"Ninety per cent of corals in Seychelles and in some islands of Indonesia are already dead. We will witness the consequences in the next ten years," says Goreau. The dead coral barriers have not disintegrated so far, but if and when they do low-lying islands in the Indian Ocean region would witness severe beach erosion, besides experiencing huge losses in fisheries. ■

Chicanos paint their way back



Jobless young ethnics in several cities of the southwest US are finding a purpose in life when they get together and paint murals

In the Arizona city of Tucson, 100 km from the Mexican border, 1995 was a record year for crime. Ninety-four of its 667,000 inhabitants (29 per cent of whom are Hispanic, 3.8 per cent blacks and 3.5 per cent Indian) were murdered. Most of the victims were members of these minorities.

One of them was Pete Valenzuela, an unaggressive 15-year-old who didn't belong to a gang. He was gunned down in broad daylight while walking in the no-man's-land between two rival "territories", Barrio Anita and Barrio Sovaco. After his funeral, hatreds intensified and Pete's friends swore to avenge his death.

A Chicano mural painter named Julio Bernal, and Martín Hernández, a community organizer, realized it was urgent to channel these dangerous emotions. They suggested painting a mural to commemorate the dead teenager and called it *Por Vida* (In Favour of Life). The project attracted about 40 young people aged between nine and 17, who worked on it together for nine months. To raise money to buy materials, they washed car windows in the evenings and at weekends.

"Pete was like a brother," says Gino Molina. "I nearly went crazy after he died. But mulling over our culture together, discussing what people feel about the family or religion and trying to express all that on a wall helped me a lot. I didn't know anything about art, but I just got on with it. If I hadn't, I would have gone on drinking. I used to live in fear and I carried a gun."

Today, 19-year-old Gino is father of a baby and has just finished another mural in memory of Pete which he painted by himself on the wall of the local supermarket. There are now more than 130 such murals in and around Tucson.

In Arizona, Texas, California and New Mexico, Chicanos (Mexican immigrants and/or their descendants) are sizeable minorities which are still growing as a result of immigration. It is hard for them to get a foothold in American society and many of them live in *barrios* (Spanish for neighbourhoods), either in the centre of big cities or on their outskirts, away from areas where there are jobs. These communities tend to be self-contained and generate self-destructive tensions and conflicts. Young Chicanos face many problems—dropping out of school, violent gang rivalry, alcoholism, drug dealing and illegal gun possession—all of which can lead to serious gang warfare stirred up by agents of organized crime.

Defusing tensions

Walls in the *barrios* are often daubed with slogans and vicious graffiti reflecting this violent world. But more and more magnificent frescoes are appearing in this urban landscape, reflecting a very old Mexican tradition of murals depicting scenes from the past or aspects of modern life. After Mexico's 1910 revolution, painters such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros renewed this form of expression and used it to record the great social struggles of their time. In the 1970s, other artists took over where they left off. In the United States, artists, sculptors, painters and art teachers harnessed their ideals, skills and talents to helping young members of their ethnic group who had gone astray to find a

'We sprayed graffiti on walls, smashed windows and raised hell at night, just for the fun of it. We all did. In the end, I got into trouble with the police because there are drugs everywhere here'

© Annick Tréguer, Paris

For some young descendants of the Yaqui Indians chased out of Mexico at the turn of the century, painting is a way of rediscovering their roots and expressing their identity.

place in American society through art and highlighting their shared roots.

Pedro Flores, who is descended from the Yaqui Indians who were chased out of Mexico at the beginning of the century, got a bad start in life. "I hung out on the streets with a gang of friends for years," he says. "We sprayed graffiti on walls, smashed windows and raised hell at night, just for the fun of it. We all did. In the end, I got into trouble with the police because there are drugs everywhere here." He did his first paintings during community events organized by two mural artists, Miguel Flores, also of Yaqui stock, and Antonio Pazos, a Mexican who has been living in Tucson for more than 20 years.

"Their paintings, inspired by our culture, reminded me who I was and where I came from. They helped me get a grip on myself. Now I couldn't imagine life without painting." Pedro resumed his studies and finished high school. At 18, he is a counsellor in the recreation department of the Yaqui tribe's Pascua Reservation (more than 5,000 Yaquis live in the Tucson area). He is organizing several painting and mosaic projects for young people. On walls and movable panels, they have together depicted major aspects of their culture, such as the traditional "dance of the deer", which takes place at night and goes on until sunrise. Pedro in turn tries to help teenagers break the vicious circle of violence and marginalization they are trapped in.

"Most families in our neighbourhood are alcoholic," says John Escalante, another Yaqui. "The fathers and mothers drink and the cousins and uncles sell drugs. We aren't taught about our culture in school. It's denied and buried by white society. If I hadn't done the murals with the other Yaquis, I would never have made it, because my father, drowned in his booze, couldn't care less."

In 1996, Pazos, who is assistant director of Tucson's El Rio Neighborhood Centre, decided to take up a major challenge: making peace between two warring groups of jobless Chicanos, one Hispanic, the other Yaqui. He also wanted to give them a taste for work. He decided on repainting the dirty graffiti-covered wall of a power station which marked the frontier between a Yaqui neighbourhood (Barrio Libre) and a Hispanic neighbourhood (South Tucson). The electricity company gave its permission and even funded the project.

One day, Pazos began painting on the wall. A boy soon appeared and asked what he was doing. "This is our wall," he said. Pazos replied sharply: "Then it's about time you all got down here. It's your wall and there's a lot of work to do." Young people poured in from the two neighbourhoods, and Pazos, playing up his Mexican roots and Yaqui blood, organized them into a team to paint pictures of their culture and its highlights. Things got dangerously tense at one point, though, because the young Hispanic Chicanos did not want the cultural roots of the Yaqui Chicanos depicted on the part of the wall nearest the Hispanic Chicano neighbourhood.

With the help of neighbours, Pazos traced the history of the pre-Columbian civilizations. "I wanted to show them that we're all of mixed blood, that half of all Mexicans have both Spanish and Indian blood. They realized they were mixed too and that this should be shown in the mural. So the first brightly-coloured communal wall painting was born and the rival gangs learned to get to know and talk to one another instead of killing each other.

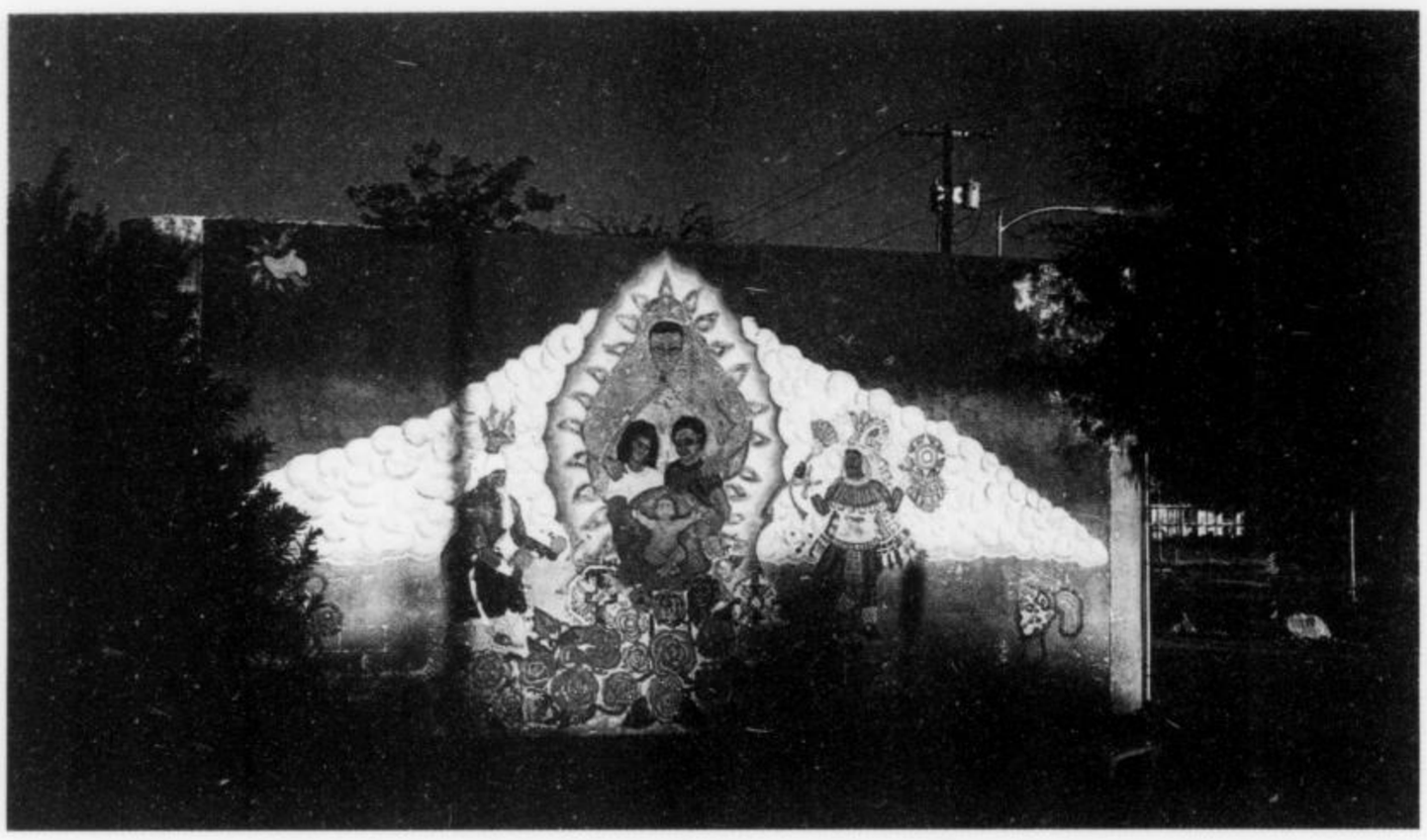
Leaving gangs behind

The U.S.-Mexican border city of El Paso and its 606,000 mostly Hispanic citizens have one of the highest jobless rates of any U.S. city—nearly 12 per cent compared with the national average of 5.4 per cent. One well-known mural painter, Carlos Callejo, and an art education teacher at Del Valle High School, María Almeida Natividad, joined forces to ferret out new talent, give young people from poor families a sense of self-esteem and train them in a skill to help them find a job.

'I wanted to involve my students in group-produced wall paintings to help them discover the history of the region and their own history'

"I wanted to involve my students in group-produced wall paintings to help them discover the history of the region and their own history," says Almeida. That chance came last year with the 400th anniversary of the arrival in El Paso of its first Spanish conquistador, Juan de Oñate. Doing a mural around this theme in the high school grounds "changed the lives" of several pupils.

"It opened up my mind and helped me get beyond my problems and leave behind the gangs in my neighbourhood," says Misael Armendáriz. "I feel prouder of my Mexican ▸



© Annick Tréguer, Paris

This mural was painted by a group of Tucson teenagers in memory of a 15-year-old who died a violent death.

roots and I express that in what I paint." Misael has already won several small painting commissions from the city authorities and will soon go to university to study art.

As a result of what he has learned while organizing the painting, Hernández has rethought the stereotypes he has in his own head and those of his community. "We decided to include in the mural people who suffered at the hands of Oñate—Indians with hands and feet chopped off. History sometimes gives its heroes shiny but false images. A mural painter has a very big responsibility: ordinary folk don't go to museums but they do walk past outdoor murals. So we have to paint the truth."

Many other experiments are under way in El Paso, where more than 150 wall paintings now brighten up the city. Jesús Alvarado, a social worker in El Segundo, the city's poorest neighbourhood, runs city-sponsored graphic art workshops. The most recent murals show the struggle of the Indians in Mexico's Chiapas state.

These people, along with many others, experience a kind of collective therapy through the murals—intensive work which allows children and teenagers to find fulfilment within their own culture as dignified and respected human beings. ■

Annick Tréguer in Tucson and El Paso.

Walls that **speak** volumes

"Many of the people who have done the wall paintings aren't professional artists or decorators. They are children and teenagers who have started using colour. A lot of these unemployed kids had latent talents that suddenly gave a voice to the walls and the asphalt. It was a kind of pop art. Professional painters and decorators only joined in much later." That is how Senegal's *Sud-Hebdo* magazine summed up a remarkable movement called *Set setal* ("clean and make clean" in the Wolof language) that spread among the young people of Dakar, the country's capital.

Children and teenagers in some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods started covering walls with magnificent, colourful murals, often with slogans scrawled across them. Kids' stuff? Not exactly. Like graffiti artists in the United States, these young people were using wall painting to express their need to be heard and recognized. Not long before, they had been giving vent to their frustrations with what they saw as sick urban society—dirty streets in a city where garbage was no longer being collected, joblessness, drug addiction, prostitution and so on—by hurling rocks and insults. But now peaceful groups of children and teenagers were expressing their values, fears and hopes in imaginative paintings. They also showed their sense of responsibility by pitching in to help clean up the city.

To paint vivid murals you don't need any formal education. Although 80 per cent of Haitians can neither read nor write, they have a tradition of painting magnificent graffiti art in the street, on roadside hoardings and on just about any surface they can find—when the government allows them to. Perhaps the grey, dingy walls in all the world's cities are just waiting for an opportunity to speak. ■

Boys in school still outnumber **girls**

"The most urgent priority is to ensure access to education for girls and women," says article 3 of the World Declaration on Education for All adopted by 155 countries in 1990. But a recent UNICEF report, *The State of the World's Children 1999*, reveals that only the industrial countries have achieved parity between girls and boys in primary school enrolment.

The disparity in favour of boys still exists in most developing countries. Of the 130 million children aged 6 to 11 who are out of school in the developing world, 73 million are girls. Gender inequality is most blatant in South Asia, where there is a 12-point gap between boys' and girls' school enrolment. Next come North Africa and the Middle East (nine points) followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (four points). Situations can vary widely within the same region. Afghanistan bans girls from going to school, whereas Bangladesh has achieved parity and some Arab countries—Jordan, Libya and Tunisia—are not far off. Latin America and the Caribbean are an exception to the rule: more girls than boys are enrolled in school. In Trinidad and Tobago, UNICEF says, boys think working hard in school is not macho enough.

The advantages of educating girls are obvious. An educated woman's children are healthier and she is more likely to see that they go to school. She has more control over her fertility, plays a greater part in economic life, and stands up more for her rights at home and in the community.

UNICEF says that adopting a series of key measures would help reduce the disparity in favour of boys. They include recruiting more female teachers; rooting out gender bias from teaching materials; making schools safe for girls, who are sometimes victims of sexual harassment; locating schools closer to children's homes in countries where it is dangerous for them to walk the roads; offering free education to eliminate, among other things, the favouritism that benefits boys. ■

A new deal for the poor

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Collapsing national economies, natural disasters and political storms have dragged millions of people below the poverty line in the 1990s. Meanwhile, in many parts of the world, vast proportions of the population have been living in misery for years without any solutions yet in sight. Against such a backdrop, a new approach is emerging on ways to fight poverty. No longer are open markets, government or the poor seen separately as the key to eradicating poverty. Instead, a dominant view these days is that all three need to be brought together in a concerted attack. In short, a new deal is being offered to help the world's poor. But is it enough? Our dossier looks at the prospects and problems in the three-pronged battle against poverty.

In a west Bucharest public housing estate that has seen better days, Liliana tries to prepare a casserole for dinner. "But without meat. Meat would be a luxury," says the 41-year-old high school teacher, who was once middle class but now counts herself amongst Romania's "new poor", part of the fallout from the collapse of the state in the former Eastern bloc.

Half way around the world, in Jakarta, where luxury cars, designer labels and sky-high aspirations once symbolized an economic boom, a recent financial crisis has overnight deflated the economy and plunged huge swaths of Indonesian society into poverty. In the middle-class Bumi Serpong Damai housing complex, for example, children scavenge through the garbage looking for used bottles and old newspapers, while adults often take to more extreme means. "They are easily tempted to steal," says a security guard at the complex.

Meanwhile, in the fishing village of Cabique on the shores of the Caribbean in southeastern Haiti, an entire community is sinking steadily deeper ▸

into poverty as a result of environmental mismanagement. Deforestation means that the pounding tropical rainstorms break up the earth and sweep into the sea tonnes of sole which choke the coral where the fish feed. As a result, the fish that once supplied a livelihood for this village have moved on. "It's been 10 years now that I've done absolutely nothing because there's nothing to do here," says Victor, 35, a former soldier and a father of two children, who picks up spare cash working in local harvests.

Elsewhere, many are locked in a vicious circle of poverty that has existed for generations and seems likely to persist. In the village of Mimetala, 30 kms from Yaounde, capital of Cameroon, 80-year-old Marie Biloa has been unable to work since a car accident 15 years ago. There is no state aid for the unemployed, but she did receive a payout from a private insurance company. When her son-in-law stole that money and ran off, she was left without a means of support. Today Biloa dreams of going

Poverty is like a disease that has gone into remission but later strikes back with a vengeance

back into her former business of selling snacks at a street stall, but she lacks the $18 needed as a start-up investment. Neither can the rest of her family help. Biloa's daughter has been abandoned by her husband. Biloa's 20-year-old grandson is ill, with a sickness that has not yet been diagnosed because the family cannot afford to take him to hospital for tests. And so Biloa is forced to exist on handouts from villagers while a local charity gives her medical help free of charge.

Like a disease that has gone into remission but later strikes back with a vengeance, poverty has over recent years resurged in places that once seemed to be on the mend. As the Romanian, Indonesian and Haitian vignettes illustrate, the root causes range from a political vacuum left in the wake of formerly authoritarian regimes, to the collapse of financial markets that once seemed to be the surest remedy for poverty, to natural disaster and environmental mismanagement. The impact of these factors has been breathtaking: in the last two years alone, tens of millions of persons have been added to the lists of the world's poor in Southeast Asia. In the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the number of poor has swelled by some 170 million during this decade.

Meanwhile, as in the case of Biloa, among vast stretches of humanity poverty lingers as it has for decades without any immediate hope of a cure.

But how can poverty be alleviated? In the 1980s, the so-called "Washington consensus"—an approach built around the trickle-down economics of multilateral lending institutions headquartered in the U.S. capital—saw the market as the saviour of the poor. By ensuring the efficient functioning of markets, economies would flourish and eventually wealth would make its way down to the impoverished. That at least was the theory. However, markets have proven to be fickle friends.

In our special focus on poverty, Rubens Recupero, Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development, looks in greater detail at an emerging new consensus on tackling poverty (page 20). No one pretends to have all the answers, but there does seem to be general agreement that a multi-faceted approach is vital: markets, governments and poor people themselves need to work in concert to find solutions to poverty.

Our section on the market shows that trade and capital flows are still seen as vital ingredients in the fight against poverty but are not panaceas.

'Human

The human development index

Traditional economic indicators such as per capita gross national product, give an incomplete idea of the real socio-economic conditions in a country, and to provide a fuller picture the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) created the human development index (HDI) in 1990. The HDI takes into account three types of data: life expectancy; educational attainment (adult literacy and combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment); and standard of living measured by real purchasing power.

The index is a scale between 1 (the highest) and 0 (the lowest). High human development is regarded as comprising HDI values of 0.8 and above; medium comprising values of 0.5 to 0.799; and low comprising values below 0.5

*Some 1.3 billion people live on less than $1 a day and almost 3 billion on less than $2 a day. Almost 11% of the inhabitants of the industrialized countries live on less than $11.4 dollars a day.**

*** These figures and others accompanying articles in this dossier are taken from UNDP reports published in 1998**

development' worldwide

Human development index

0.185-0.378 | 0.378-0.633 | 0.633-0.767 | 0.767-0.887 | 0.887-0.96 | No data

Source:Ozer Babakol, Human Development Report Office, UNDP, New York 1999

Indeed, the financial crisis in Southeast Asia (pages 23 and 24) has demonstrated that faith in economic growth as a way out of poverty has led to neglect of safety net-building to help the poor during times of trouble.

Part two of this dossier demonstrates, by looking at the United States, the former Soviet bloc and Tunisia (pages 24 to 31), under what circumstances the state can play a constructive role in the fight on poverty, and why in some cases the state has proven ineffective in finding solutions. The theme running through this section is that the state must play a vital part in the war on poverty, knowing when to intervene and when to stand aside.

Finally, in recent years analysts, politicians and non-government aid organizations have increasingly discovered that poor people may themselves possess analytic and other abilities that can be instrumental in grappling with poverty (pages 32 to 36). Making use of the skills and cultural attributes of the poor is proving to be much more important than was imagined a decade ago. But local cultures can also be an impediment to improvement. ■

John Kohut
with contributions from journalists
Mirel Bran in Bucharest, Andreas Harsono
in Jakarta, Christian Lionet in Port-au Prince,
and Valentin Simeon Zinga in Yaounde

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The final and optimal crisis of the century

Global financial crises have shaken faith in the market as panacea. Today, the world is grappling for a new consensus to meet the challenges of globalization, development and poverty.

Rubens Ricupero*

It may sound paradoxical to join two such apparently contradictory words as "optimal" and "crisis". I heard the expression for the first time from the Director of the Institute for International Economics, C. Fred Bergsten, in Washington, D.C. He explained that it was becoming increasingly common there, in the sense of the crisis being grave enough to force the mighty to finally do something without being so serious as to render the action useless and too late.

We may be approaching an optimal point. For even the most enthusiastic prophets of the brave new world of globalization (for instance, participants in the World Economic Forum at Davos) are beginning to question the wisdom of their blind beliefs, and to look for a human and social dimension to add to their world view.

One of the advantages of crises is that they can play a catalyzing role in changing our perception of things. And so, it seems, in the face of crisis we are now witnessing growing signs of a new turning point.

This new current addresses humanity's future in terms of globalization, development and poverty, and asks a fundamental question: what is the nature and sense of the economy? Is it an autonomous and largely self-regulating mechanism like the galaxies or the planetary system, or is it a product of culture and society, the result of societal choices based on values?

Once more the impulse for change is coming not so much from academic debate but from reality itself, from the huge gaps between the rich and the poor. To cite just one example: basic education for all would cost $6 billion a year. By comparison, $8 billion are spent annually on cosmetics in the United States alone.

Such grotesque, even obscene, contrasts show dramatically that the twin problems of development and poverty are still very much with us more than a decade after the Washington Consensus claimed to have reached "universal convergence" around "the common core of wisdom embraced by all serious economists". In broad terms, this approach recommended that governments should: (i) pursue economic stability in the sense of balancing the budget and

* Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

eliminating balance-of-payments deficits; (ii) open their economies to the rest of the world through trade and financial liberalization; and (iii) promote free market capitalism through privatization, deregulation, and other measures of liberalization. Propagated through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the Washington Consensus has been the dominant paradigm for development from the early 1980s until the mid-1990s. Its introduction entailed a total shift from earlier thinking, usually seen as a shift from state-led *dirigisme* to market-oriented policies.

Over the last few years, two important challenges to the Washington Consensus have emerged: firstly, the UNDP's sustainable human development approach and, secondly, an emerging "Southern Consensus", founded on analyses made from the perspective of countries undertaking late industrialization and seeking to catch up with rich countries in the global economy. This Southern Consensus has not yet been sufficiently elaborated to incorporate predominantly agricultural economies of Africa and the least developed countries. But it can be deduced from the increasing convergence between the Latin American experience and East Asian development models.

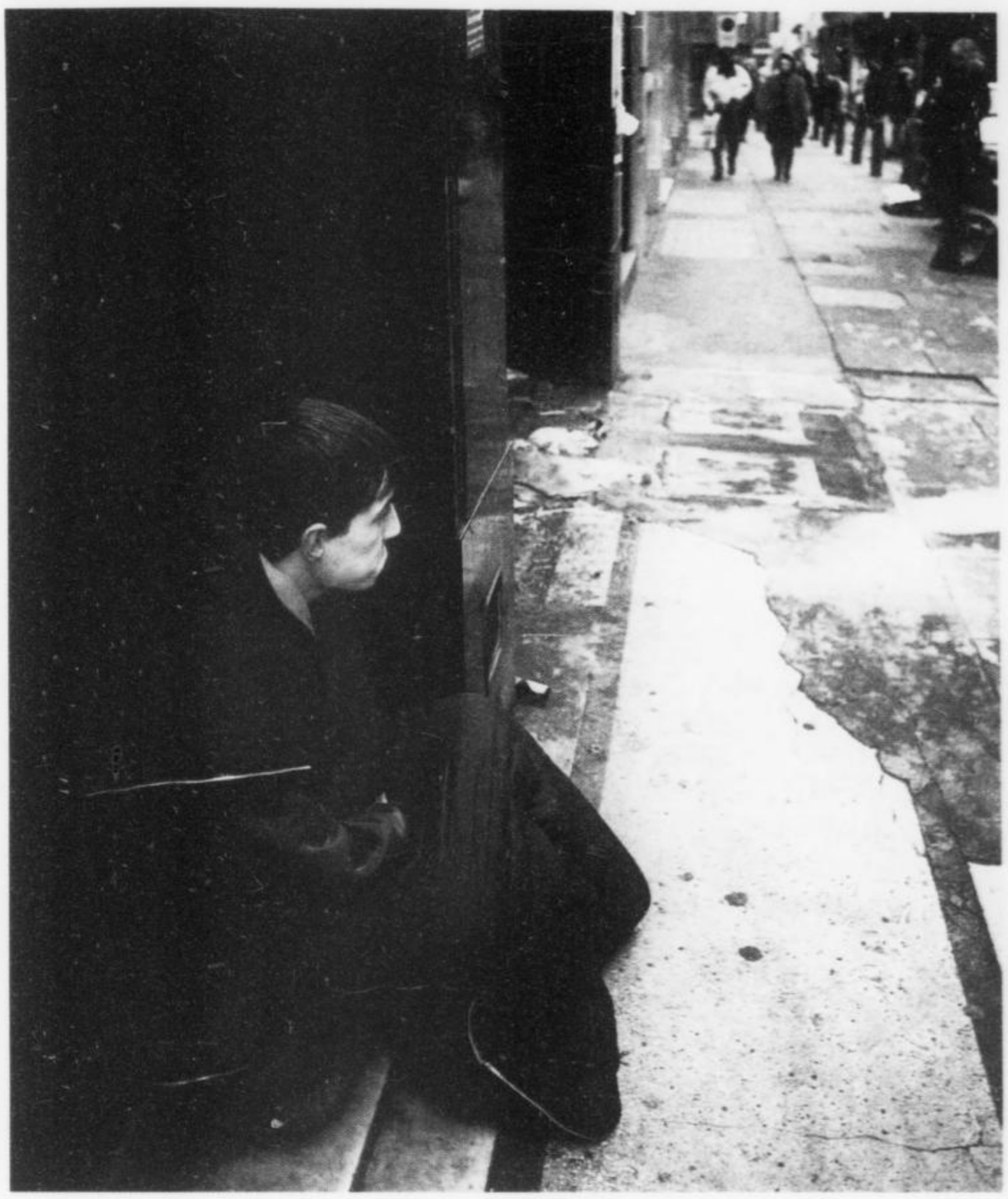
The overselling of globalization

The sustainable human development approach espouses a set of values different from those underpinning the Washington Consensus. Whereas the Washington Consensus focuses on the promotion of gross domestic product growth and has been implemented through a top-down, donor-conditionality-driven and outside-expert-led approach, the sustainable human development approach argues that development should improve the nature of people's lives, and that it should be founded on participation and a more equal partnership between developing countries and aid donors.

Moreover, the Washington Consensus has cracked in the practical sense that real differences of opinion have emerged in Washington, between the IMF and the World Bank, on the causes of the Asian crisis and how best to handle it. The Chief Economist of the Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, has argued that there is a need for a "post-Washington Consensus" to achieve broader objectives—higher living standards and equitable, sustainable and democratic development—using a wider range of instruments to correct market failure, to foster competition, and to control short-term capital flows.

It may be too early yet to announce the final demise of the Washington Consensus despite Stiglitz's critique, UNCTAD's work in favour of a Southern Perspective or the renewed emphasis on poverty eradication resulting from the 1995 Copenhagen Summit for Social Development.

The emerging new consensus will be driven by the main "workable" alternative, East Asian models, strengthened through their convergence with Latin America experience, and adapted to Africa and the least developed countries. There are still serious obstacles facing efforts to develop a more comprehensive consensus that would finally be able to overcome and reconcile the old ideological antinomies: market versus state, price stability versus economic growth, capital accumulation versus income distribution, competition and open integration into the world economy versus national industrialization and consolidation of a strong local productive capacity.



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A homeless youth in London.

There will be a special difficulty in devising strategies for long-term development in a world of globalized money where speculative attacks and financial volatility can unravel and destroy in a matter of weeks the economic growth and poverty reduction achieved in 30 years, as happened recently in Indonesia. In other words, here is where the problems of development and poverty coincide with the challenge of globalization.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall almost 10 years ago, globalization was oversold to the public as a sure way of bringing more accelerated growth and prosperity for all. But the record of economic growth in the 1990s has been a dismal one, not only much inferior to the exceptional rates of the 30 Glorious Years of the post-war period but disappointing even in comparison with the troubled 1970s. Still worse, we are approaching the year 2000 without a solution to the aggravation of the two most serious failures of the twentieth century: mass unemployment and growing inequality inside and among nations.

One of the problems with the conventional approach to globalization is that it is too narrow. It usually reduces and impoverishes a complex phenomenon to just one of its components, the ▶

Available food supplies ought to be enough to provide each of the planet's inhabitants with at least 2,700 calories per day. But more than 800 million people go hungry.

economic unification of commercial markets, investment opportunities and financial markets on a planetary scale. In that reductionist way, we miss the rich diversity of what actually is an historic process with a very strong cultural element. Arising out of the breakthroughs in electronics and telecommunications which constitute the first scientific revolution to change our perceptions of time and space, unlike the previous ones that dealt basically with energy and matter, globalization represents the unification of the planet for human interaction and mutual knowledge. But scientific and technological breakthroughs are no guarantees in themselves that the new techniques will be used not to dominate but to liberate and promote human beings. In the past, it was precisely the scientific revolution of Galileo and Newton which gave the West the technological superiority that made colonialism and imperialism possible.

The situation now is certainly more decisive in terms both of promise and threats. Indeed, never before has knowledge become so crucial as to constitute the very condition for development. As we move away from a type of economy where success was determined by capital, cheap labour or abundance of resources towards one that is knowledge-intensive, the monopoly of information and technology may easily become a frightening weapon for domination and oppression, the roots of inequality.

Meeting the basic needs of the populations of developing countries (food, drinking water, sanitation, health care and education) would cost roughly $40 billion a year, or 4% of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world.

We are beginning to understand the first principles of a new branch of economics, information economics. The old presumption was that information had a zero or negligible cost. We now know that information has a cost and that this cost of transaction may be the difference between economic success or failure. Without access to information there will be no access to markets. The market solution will not always be the optimal solution because markets are systems to process and convey information and they are never perfect in performing this task. Firms and economic actors, people and governments, have to deal with information and some will prove more able at it than others. Those who are well educated and who have good access to information and knowledge will prevail in a highly competitive world. What will happen then to the legions of losers in the global competition, unskilled workers in rich countries or marginalized countries and continents like Africa? To take care of them, we will have to redefine the concept of competition as a game that not only needs clear rules and an impartial arbiter, as in the World Trade Organization, but also, like all games, requires training, preparation and education. In the same way as one has to learn how to play a game, nations need to learn how to produce, how to trade, how to compete. Governments and international organizations must strive to make information and knowledge available to all in an equal way.

The return of Adam Smith

Even if we find how to share information and knowledge in such a way as to allow widespread economic development of all or most countries, this will not guarantee *per se* a fair and balanced distribution of the results among all categories of citizens. Accelerated economic growth is certainly a necessary condition for rapid poverty reduction, as was demonstrated in China and Asian countries in general. It is not, however, a sufficient condition, as we have learned from some Latin American examples of extreme concentration of wealth and income and from what is now happening in many industrialized societies.

We still do not know enough about how to balance growth and distribution, or reward initiative with relative equality. Development, poverty and globalization are problems that will only be solved if we go back to the original approach to economics as "political economy", as part of what Adam Smith taught: moral philosophy, that is, the economy as a product of the "polis", the city of human beings. Not as the planetary system whose laws we cannot change, but something that is the result of societal choices based on shared values. And the first of all values is that the economy was created for man and not man for the economy. This is the only way to promote genuine hope, and faith that the future will be better than the past. ■

Yardsticks of poverty

A recent trend has been to regard poverty as a process of denial of basic opportunities and choices for human development, rather than just a shortage of income. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s *Human Development Report 1997*, which was exclusively devoted to poverty eradication, stressed the multidimensional nature of poverty and introduced a human poverty index (HPI) containing three variables: the percentages of people expected to die before age 40, of illiterate adults, and of people without access to health services and safe water and of underweight children under five.

The dollar-a-day poverty line is one of the most widely used measures of impoverishment. It defines the poor as those whose income is less than a dollar a day per person, an amount calculated at purchasing power parity (PPP) to be enough to buy a bundle of goods necessary for survival. PPP adjusts for differences in local costs in different countries. The standard for the dollar-a-day definition is based on 1985 dollars and prices.

In 1998, UNDP published a report entitled *Overcoming Human Poverty*, which contained the following definitions:

Human poverty: The lack of essential human capabilities, such as being literate or adequately nourished.

Income poverty: The lack of minimally adequate income or expenditures.

Extreme poverty: Indigence or destitution, usually specified as the inability to satisfy minimum food needs.

Overall poverty: A less severe level of poverty, usually defined as the inability to satisfy essential nonfood as well as food needs. The definition of essential nonfood needs can vary significantly across countries.

Relative poverty: Poverty defined by standards that can change across countries or over time. An example is a poverty line set at one-half of mean per capita income—implying that the line can rise with along with income.

Absolute poverty: Poverty defined by a fixed standard, one example being the international dollar-a-day poverty line. Another example is a poverty line whose real value stays the same over time so as to determine changes in poverty in one country.

The UNDP says that out of 130 countries, 90 have developed operational definitions of extreme poverty and 86 have definitions of overall poverty, only a minority of which are solely income-based. Almost all the rest combine income with measures of people's living conditions and quality of life. "This represents an important shift. A decade ago, only a minority of countries had official definitions of poverty and most of these were based exclusively on income." ■

1. The markets

A fickle friend

In Asia, financial crisis has thrust millions back into impoverishment and shattered faith in the ability of markets alone to address the problems of the poor. But can the region capitalize on the lessons learned from the crash?

Hadijah sits cross-legged on the floor inside her tiny, dimly-lit tin-roofed cabin in the Cileng-gang area in the southwestern belt of Jakarta and tries to hide her embarrassment as she describes her attempts to find work.

"They say I'm too old," the 43-year-old widow mutters, referring to a South Korean factory and a German business centre not far from her house. Managers at both companies have rejected her job application.

Hadijah's fruitless effort began in October last year after she lost her job of 24 years as a tea lady at a Jakarta car spare parts manufacturer, which was badly hit by a sudden fall-off in demand in the wake of the Asian financial crisis that began its sweep across the region two years ago.

Meanwhile, rampant inflation has meant Hadijah spends far more money than before the crisis to buy food and to keep her only daughter in school. Prices of basic commodities such as rice, sugar, cooking oil and kerosene have increased, in local currency terms, three to five times what they were before the crisis hit.

Against a backdrop of awesome economic growth in the 1970s, 1980s and early this decade, the common wisdom across Southeast Asia used to be that the market was the key to eradicating poverty. To a large extent that indeed was the case. However, the financial crisis has shaken that faith and exposed the weakness of the economic trickle-down approach to poverty alleviation.

"The 'magic of the market' may work for those who have ready access to capital, information and skills," Indonesia's education and culture minister Juwono Sudarsono last August told an international seminar on Indonesian reforms, "but not for those who lack education, skills and well-placed connections."

According to Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of people living below the poverty line—those who consume a minimum 2,100 calories a day—had soared to 95.8 million or about 48 per cent of Indonesia's total population of 202 million by the end of 1998.

It is indeed a huge setback. In 1976 Indonesia had 54.2 million poor people or 40.1 per cent of the whole population. But by 1996, after two decades of rapid economic growth, the world's fourth most populous country had reduced the number of the poor down to 22.5 million or 11.3 per cent of the population.

Economic recovery is vital if the trend is to be reversed. However, as a World Bank report points out, the rapid economic growth of previous years had papered over long-standing problems with regard to poverty alleviation. Among these are persistent pockets of poverty and rising inequality, weaknesses in labour rights and need for social security nets.

"A rapid return to macroeconomic stability and growth through distributionally favourable adjustment policies is the only way to begin to put a floor under falling incomes of the poor," says the World Bank report. ▶

Looting in the ethnic Chinese district of Jakarta, Indonesia, in May 1998.

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In Indonesia, as in many other parts of Asia, households by and large have few formal mechanisms to protect them from poverty resulting from job losses, disability or aging. Instead, most rely primarily on personal savings and informal family and community links. But the financial crisis has cut so deeply that those buffers against poverty are proving to be too thin for comfort.

Hadijah, for example, spent 1.5 million rupiah of her separation pay to build a small food vending stand in front of her house last December. A niece contributed 0.5 million rupiah to buy basic commodities. At the end of the month they are able to take home a paltry 150,000 rupiah, under $20 at recent exchange rates.

But not everyone has even that frail survival mechanism and the result has been the worst social tension and violence seen in decades.

Crime triggered by hunger

Amid mounting ethnic and religious tension, riots and looting have taken place in Indonesian towns and villages as demoralized soldiers do nothing but look on. One of the worst riots took place in Jakarta on 14-16 May 1998 when thousands of looters ran amok attacking properties owned by ethnic Chinese, whose economic prominence in this country has made them a target. More than 1,200 people were killed, mostly in burned supermarkets, and many Indonesian women of Chinese descent were sexually harassed. Even outside of riots, looting has become a major problem, with highwaymen along an important road linking Jakarta with Surabaya, Indonesia's second most populous city, simply stopping the drivers and taking over the trucks loaded with food

Ironically, the devaluation of Indonesia's currency since the crisis broke, along with rising food prices, has caused a huge shift in the internal terms of trade in favour of farmers, while palm-oil and cocoa producers have benefited from soaring world prices for their produce. The World Bank says rural consumption has increased 10 per cent over the past year.

"The driving force behind this crime is hunger. The hungry and angry people provide a good place for the devil," said rural sociologist Loekman Soetrisno of Gajah Mada University.

In response to the crisis, the government has sold cheaply or even given away basic commodities like rice, sugar and cooking oil. Charity organizations have organized cheap lunch boxes for poor workers and unemployed people.

But many analysts say that the effort is not enough.

As recommended by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank—key sources of finance to prop up Indonesia during the crisis—the government in Jakarta has set aside about $2.4 billion in funds to carry out a social safety net programme for the 1998/1999 fiscal year. The programme consists of food subsidies for the poor, health services and subsidized medicine, financial help for schools and funds for social work to boost employment.

However, implementing the programme, introduced early last year, is difficult. According to Marie Muhammad, who chairs a programme monitoring team, only about 30 per cent of funds had been disbursed by the beginning of this year due to overcautiousness of government officials in parceling out the aid for fear of any graft or other irregularities.

Likewise, Thailand, also hard hit by the financial crisis, is trying to improve its social security system. Severance pay, the key net for the unemployed, last year was extended to 10 months from six months. The government has also launched a program to provide free health care for laid-off workers and their families. Aid from multilateral financial institutions is being channeled increasingly into training and other programmes to help the unemployed.

Even so, such efforts appear to be far from adequate. Southeast Asian countries have been so enfeebled by the crisis that now, when social security is most needed, is also the most difficult time for governments to raise funds for social welfare. So far, safety net programmes have been set up as largely short-term measures to deal with the effects of the crisis rather than as steps forward to restructuring socio-economic systems over the long term with a view to protecting the poor.

However, Southeast Asia may at least have made a start towards more aggressive attempts to buffer the poor against future crises in that there is now at least recognition that the market alone is not enough to alleviate poverty. ■

Andreas Harsono in Jakarta, Indonesia

Official development assistance in steep decline

In 1970 the world's rich countries proclaimed their intention of devoting a minimum of 0.7 per cent of their gross national product (GNP) to official development assistance (ODA) to the world's most disadvantaged countries. Within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and at the General Assembly of the United Nations, they committed themselves to considerably increasing grants and concessional loans to help beneficiary countries to speed up their economic and social development.

Almost 30 years later this target was only achieved by Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, which devoted between 0.7 per cent and 1 per cent of their GNP to ODA. What's more, overall ODA has so far declined that in 1997 it was running at its lowest level for 50 years, since the Marshall Plan of 1947. According to a World Bank report entitled *Assessing Aid—What Works, What Doesn't, and Why*, published in November 1998, official development assistance flows declined by one-third in real terms between 1991 and 1997. In 1997 ODA totalled no more than 0.22% of the GNP of all donor countries, and only 0.08% of the GNP of the United States, which held the wooden spoon. Only Canada and Japan increased their ODA in real terms in 1997.

Aid now only constitutes one quarter of financial flows to developing countries, and there are big disparities in sources and volumes of development finance in each region. According to OECD, in 1997 sub-Saharan Africa received an average of some $27 per capita of aid and $3 per capita of foreign direct investment. By contrast, Latin America and the Caribbean received $13 per capita of aid and $62 of foreign direct investment.

The World Bank recommends states to target their ODA to countries that have made big efforts to achieve "sound" management (non-corrupt institutions, respect for the rule of law and economic freedoms, open markets, etc.). It estimates that if $10 billion of aid were directed towards these countries which are unjustly penalized by the overall decline of ODA, 25 million persons would be rescued from poverty. ■

Mali: growth without development

Whose fault is it that economic growth has been accompanied by increasing poverty in one of the world's poorest countries?

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Most of the poor scrape a living in the informal economy.

In the last few years, Mali's economic growth rate has picked up, but most Malians haven't noticed the benefits. "It's growth without jobs, development or freedom," says Aminata D. Traoré, a psychosociologist, businesswoman and decorative artist who is Mali's minister of culture and tourism. "Macroeconomic performance is being achieved at the cost of the basic and urgent needs of most of the population," she says.

Mali's gross domestic product (GDP) grew on average by five per cent a year between 1994 and 1996, and poverty by two per cent a year, according to a report by the country's Observatory for Sustainable Human Development and the Struggle against Poverty (ODHD) published in July 1998. The new poor, Traoré says, "are people who've lost their jobs and those who've never had a job"—people who've been laid off from state bodies regarded as overstaffed, and young people without a job. Most of them gravitate to the informal economy, where taxes are not paid and figures are unavailable. "Without this sector the situation would be explosive," according to Traoré.

Today, 72 per cent of of Mali's 9.2 million population live below the poverty line, i.e. on barely $180 a year (less than 50 cents a day), according to ODHD. The indicators present a grim picture. One third of Malians cannot expect to live to the age of 40; almost four-fifths are illiterate; over half lack clean water supplies; and two-thirds have no access to health services. Half the children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition, as against 35 per cent in 1988. The only bright spot is a slowdown in the rate at which poverty is spreading. Between 1989 and 1994, the number of people living below the poverty line rose by 11 per cent a year, as against two per cent since.

The world's three richest people have assets that exceed the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least developed countries.

Traoré believes that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund bear considerable responsibility for deteriorating living conditions. In a recently published book, *L'Etau* (Actes Sud publishers, Paris, 1999), she claims for her country the right to shape its own destiny. For several years, "decisions have been taken without the Malians, and for most of the time without their even being aware of the fact, and this is bound to jeopardize chances of consolidating the democratization process," she laments. "The needy are hardest hit by measures imposed on Africa's overindebted countries. These measures also discredit the state, which is called on to withdraw from such vital sectors as education, health, water supply and sanitation. In short, social welfare has to be privatized so that the state can meet its commitments to its creditors."

Bad management

She believes that these reforms aim to consolidate the power of the world's ruling elite. "Their purpose is to create more opportunities for the powerful and they extend control of our minds as well as our raw materials by the rich countries." She also believes that they undermine state efforts to improve the situation of the deprived. At the end of 1994, the Malian government decided to focus on sustainable development and the struggle against poverty, drawing up a "national strategy" in 1997. But this "laudable option" will fail if the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank continue to follow the same approach, Traoré believes. "Under adjustment policies the state has very little room for manoeuvre. Each dossier—employment, youth, women, health, education, the environment—requires money that is not locally available. To obtain finance from funding bodies means submitting to conditions that are supposed to improve management and productivity. These conditions are actually counter-productive: low wages are a disincentive to workers, perpetuate bad management and spawn unrest and political instability."

Traoré does not deny the responsibility of African states in the bankruptcy of their economies. "I don't say there isn't corruption. . . . But I plead for the sharing of responsibility. Most of the decisions that have been taken in Africa have been the result of advice, guidance, and in some cases constraint. Now we must be lucid, rigorous, and demanding both on ourselves and on those who claim to help us." ■

Sophie Boukhari

Chile's two-track therapy

Ultra-liberal economic measures strongly backed up by state intervention have reduced poverty, but there are still glaring inequalities

Chile is the only country in Latin America where poverty has substantially diminished over the past decade. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, based in Santiago de Chile, says the trend began in 1987 under the Pinochet dictatorship, two years before the return of democracy.

In that year, 39 per cent of Chileans lived below the poverty line. By 1996, the figure had almost halved, to 20 per cent. Chile's president, Eduardo Frei, says two million of his country's 14.5 million people have emerged from poverty since 1990 and that the incidence of poverty has fallen by half.

There seem to be three major reasons for this: sustained economic growth, increased social spending and the launching of several job-creation programmes. All the politicians claim credit for it, of course. The right wing, pointing out that poverty began to decline towards the end of military rule, claims it was largely the result of ultra-liberal economic policies applied since 1978.

Each year, almost 12 million children die before their fifth birthday.

General Augusto Pinochet brought in economists from Milton Friedman's "Chicago school" of monetarists and Chile became the first Latin American country to rigorously deregulate and privatize its economy, open up markets and cut taxes. Inflation was tamed, growth began again and foreign investors flocked to Chile, which became known as "the jaguar of the South" in the late 1980s.

The "Chicago Boys" had promised exceptional prosperity and an automatic decline in poverty. But the ranks of the poor shrank only slowly. And as street protests grew with the approach of the 1988 and 1989 elections, the regime came up with a raft of social measures.

President Patricio Aylwin, elected in 1989, and his successor, Eduardo Frei, who has been in power since 1994, took deliberate steps to reduce poverty and counter the negative effects of ultra-liberal policies, which had tolerated a high rate of poverty. At the same time, growth remained strong—an average of 7 per cent a year between 1991 and 1997 until it slowed down last year from the effects of the Asian financial crisis.

In 1996, 71 per cent of all government expenditure went to the social sector and minimum wages rose 55 per cent in real terms between 1989 and 1996, which was faster than labour productivity. Business was called upon to share the cost of this dramatic switch and did not object overmuch to paying taxes on their increased profits. However, a supertax on the rich would have set off a storm of protest, so was out of the question.

The "Chicago Boys" had promised prosperity and an automatic decline in poverty. But the ranks of the poor shrank slowly

Along with this effort to redistribute wealth as part of President Aylwin's "fair development" programme, steps were taken to encourage new businesses. Utilities like electricity, telephones, drinking water and adult education were subsidized. Other programmes sent young professionals off to the country's poorest regions to stimulate development there using local labour.

The Solidarity and Social Investment Fund (FOSIS) has also played a big part and today finances more than 18,000 production projects put together by rural families, fishermen, representatives of Indian peoples and small businesses. The seven-year-old fund also has a budget to train people for these projects.

But there is still a "social debt" which Chile has not yet been able to wipe out: the gap between the very rich and the very poor. A recent World Bank report shows that Chile is one of the world's ten countries where inequalities are most pronounced. The richest 10 per cent of its population have incomes 30 times bigger than the poorest 10 per cent. This huge gap is Chile's challenge for the future, despite the great progress made so far in reducing poverty. ■

Eduardo Olivares in Santiago

A soup kitchen in Santiago, Chile.

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2. The state

USA: the self-help gospel

Individualism, an ethic of self-improvement, and suspicions of big government help explain a situation in which a rich nation tolerates high poverty levels

It is not easy, in the glassy canyons of San Francisco's financial district, to walk a block amid the early morning commuters without passing a huddled heap—a person without a home—stretched out on a bed of cardboard. Beggars sitting by garbage cans hold out frying pans for change from manicured ladies. In the suburbs, a new underclass of scavengers wheel stolen shopping carts miles through the streets, heaped with the bottles and cans they trade in for a pittance at the recycling centre.

Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York, may have chased the vagrants off the streets of Manhattan, but the reality of poverty for most ordinary Americans is all too plain to see. How is it that the richest nation in the industrialized world maintains a poverty level that has hovered around 13 per cent for a good two decades (and 16.5 per cent in 1997)?

Welfare is for those who fall by the wayside

Wealth in the United States accumulates at warp speed, but it concentrates. The richest 20 per cent of Americans, according to UN Development Programme figures, earned 8.9 times more than the poorest 20 per cent. Yet the majority of the American electorate, as far as one can ascertain, is not uncomfortable with this equation. Witness President Clinton's last State of the Union address, in which he boasted of cutting the welfare rolls in half, offered little or nothing that might materially improve the existence of the poor—and rapidly earned himself approval ratings of 76 per cent in the polls.

One thing is clear. The United States does not have a social contract. This "new" nation of heterogeneous states has never acquired the respect for an all-providing, munificent central authority that the European nation states inherited from the monarchies. Americans are deeply suspicious of government, and reluctant to pay for anything that might expand its operations. Their rates of taxation remain the lowest of the industrialized nations. The principles of utilitarianism, striving for the greatest benefit for the greatest number, have never found a sympathetic hearing in a society that prides itself on its worship of the individual.

More than 100 million people in industrial countries live below the poverty line and more than five million are homeless.

Meanwhile, the Protestant work ethic pervades political discourse. Welfare in America, in the shape of Aid to Families With Dependent Children, was originally intended to benefit widows or women with children born out of wedlock—reserved for those families that could not depend upon the earnings of a male householder. Somehow, there is an indelible association in the American psyche that makes it immoral to live off the state. Where European national insurance plans espouse universal entitlement, welfare is for those who fall by the wayside. To be poor in America carries in a certain measure the stigma of sin—a failure to realize the full potential of being American, which means the potential to better one's condition.

The fact remains that the American working class has only sporadically played a determinative role in politics, under the influence of radicals imported from Eastern Europe or south of the border, or among the relatively settled workforces of, for example, the auto industry. Most Americans identify themselves as middle-class, whether they own an ancient Ford or a yacht and, always hopeful of improving their lot, prefer not to identify with those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder.

To be poor in America carries the stigma of sin—a failure to realize the full potential of being American

One can trace the weakness of American labour back to the influence of Southern slave-owners on the American polity, pressing for the extension of slavery as new states joined the Union and militating against the political organization of labour in the industrialized north. And while solidarity in Europe was built upon the shared values of a cohesive community at the beginning of this century, in the United States, the constant pressure of new immigrant groups eager to join the workforce in the land of opportunity has kept wages down and workers acquiescent.

The result has been to keep those in power

responsive first and foremost to the interests of those who help pay for their campaigns. The first order of business for any American president is to pave the way for the proverbial "healthy business climate", with his Treasury Secretary close by his side. Capital, always holding in reserve the threat of a capital strike, in the form of a slow-down in wages, or retreat and relocation, has managed to limit its contribution to social expenditure.

A healthy business climate

The interests of the disenfranchised count for very little in this context except insofar as they surface as unsightly symptoms of urban blight, susceptible to grand invocations of the great spirit of American voluntarism, as in President George Bush's "thousand points of light".

And, indeed, there is a powerful strain of civic responsibility at work in American communities, first commented on in the 19th century by the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, which has made it possible for government to spin off many of the functions it performs in Europe to nonprofit or religious organizations, whether in the shape of hospitals, soup kitchens or shelters—in a form of mixed partnership. This safety net, however, shows every sign of being shredded under the recent welfare reform, as the two-year limit on drawing welfare benefits comes up and ever more children face the prospect of going hungry.

Few politicians of national stature have made a career as advocates for the poor. One is Jerry Brown, former governor of California and twice presidential candidate, who has spent much of the past decade deconstructing the unquestioned assumptions of the American political agenda, such as the need to cut welfare and provide jobs. "We need more welfare and fewer jobs," he argued relentlessly on his radio programme "We the People", making the point that automation is inexorably eating up jobs and that America needs an "income-maintenance system" guaranteeing the basic rights of food, lodging, education and medical care to all its citizens.

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The homeless "surface as unsightly symptoms of urban blight".

Brown now finds himself back in office as newly elected mayor of Oakland, a battered municipality across the bay from San Francisco with a large black population that the cyber-wealth pouring out of Silicon Valley has somehow managed to pass by. This is a town so depressed that the supermarkets have fled and where many people, too poor to own cars, are forced to make a two-hour bus trip simply to buy the most basic household necessities.

But Brown, in the first days of his tenure, has turned his attention not to social programmes but to police patrols in the desolate downtown area, hoping to attract new tenants to the offices in the empty skyscrapers. His order of the day: making Oakland safe—for business. ■

Vicky Elliott in San Francisco

Twilight in Tunisia

The UNDP has called Tunisia's fight against poverty a model for the rest of the Arab world. The government certainly does a great deal—perhaps a bit too much

Once upon a time there was a poor man adrift in the solitude of what the Tunisian government calls a "twilight zone"—an isolated, poverty-stricken area. One day President Ben Ali visits the poor man, promising that soon he will have water, light and a decent home thanks to "26-26". This figure is the postal account number of the National Solidarity Fund (FSN) set up at the end of 1992 and the name by which the fund is commonly known to Tunisians.

A few months after the work has been done, the poor man receives the first bills. He is illiterate, and throws them away. In due course an electricity company employee shows up on his doorstep: "You're ungrateful! Why don't you pay?" The poor man answers, "What with? I'm no richer than

World consumption expenditures on goods and services reached $24 trillion in 1998, twice the level of 1975 and six times that of 1950. But 20% of the world's people account for 86% of this total. In 70 countries with nearly a billion people, consumption is lower than it was 20 years ago.

before. And besides, I thought 27-27 would take care of the bills."

This joke, which is making the rounds in Tunis, sums up the situation well. Officials are doing more and more to help society's most disadvantaged members. But much remains to be done to bring them into economic life and break with several decades of paternalism and assistance.

If there is a country where the term "welfare state" means something it is Tunisia. The government has always pursued a vigorous social policy since independence in 1956. At first it was part of President Habib Bourguiba's socialist approach. Today it is a pillar of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's law-and-order policy, which was bolstered after fundamentalist Muslims made headway in the late 1980s. "Social stability is a matter of security," says secretary of state Kamel Haj Sassi, who manages the FSN. As a result, economic liberalization has been accompanied by an intensified anti-poverty campaign.

"From 1987 to 1993, in the middle of the adjustment period," the World Bank reports, "the government's per capita social spending increased by 14 per cent in real terms." The results are plain to see. "Despite the shock of liberalization and rising unemployment," says Tunisian economist Azzam Mahjoub, "the poverty rate has declined quite significantly since 1970, although the drop began slowing down in 1985, especially in the cities." The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) says that the percentage of people living below the poverty line (approximately a dollar per person per day in cities and half a dollar in the countryside) fell from 22 per cent in 1975 to 6.2 per cent in 1995. But the International Labour Organisation (ILO) also reports that some nine million Tunisians are still "vulnerable". So far, social transfers—equivalent to $150 per person per month, according to Mongi Layeb of the ministry of economic development—seem to have protected them from the worst.

Tunisia's neediest people benefit from an arsenal of measures. Some 112,000 households receive a dollar-a-day allowance from the National Programme of Assistance to Needy Families (PNAFN). Over 800,000 people have access to medical assistance; nearly half a million primary-school students receive an allowance every year when they go back to school after the summer vacation; and in six years the FSN has spent some $350 million on developing 928 "twilight zones". There are also housing and rural and urban development programmes. This range of measures was rounded out in late 1997 by the creation of the Tunisian Solidarity Bank (BTS). In 1998 the bank granted low-interest loans (5 per cent) to 7,300 small businesses. "Now the priority is to stimulate the spirit of enterprise," says bank chairman and CEO Abdellatif Saddem.

The government is doing a great deal. A little too much, some people say, and not always for the best. In 1996, a study by the Tunisian research firm Dirassat reported that the vagueness of public assistance allocation guidelines has encouraged cronyism. One-fifth of the PNAFN's beneficiaries live above the poverty line while the poorest families swell the waiting lists. According to several accounts, civil servants in the ministry of the interior and the cells of the ruling party interfere with the selection process.

The war on poverty focuses on the rural areas, but two-thirds of Tunisia's poor live in the cities

The war on poverty focuses on the rural areas, but two-thirds of Tunisia's poor live in the cities. In the suburbs of Tunis for example, Hay Ettadhamen, the largest of the country's 800 squatter settlements, is not classified as a "twilight zone" even though 30 per cent of the population of the former Islamic fundamentalist stronghold lives below the poverty line.

An opportunity to team up with civil society

Experts point out a third problem: government programmes could do a better job targeting the poorest people and urban youth. For example, only 4.8 per cent of the BTS's debtors are illiterate—even though one in three Tunisians can neither read nor write. "Policies to support micro-businesses and the informal sector in general will be even more necessary in the future," says Mahjoub. Especially since Tunisia has launched a campaign to upgrade its industrial fabric in preparation for implementing a free-trade accord with the European Union, which may lead to higher unemployment and lower wages.

Urban youth left out of the educational system have very few means to improve their lot. Young people are deserting the government's "neighbourhood houses", where they find the supervision too strict. Delinquency is still a taboo subject, and therefore not dealt with, while illicit alcohol sales, hashish dealing, prostitution, illegal immigration rings, theft and other petty crime known as *bezness* is on the rise.

Today the government seems to realize that it can no longer fight poverty alone on every front. To help with funding, it is appealing to the generosity of ▶

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The leather workshop in a children's rehabilitation centre in Tunisia.

Tunisians via communication campaigns and collections in companies and government offices. Government representatives say they also want to involve other skills, including those of non-governmental organizations. But development associations are few and far between. "They are unprofessional and don't always get enough encouragement from the authorities," says specialist Henda Gafsi. Many officials want to keep control over the population and believe that civil society initiatives are targeted against the state.

In Hay Ettadhamen, the independent NGO Enda Interarabe proves them wrong. The group runs a bustling centre called Espace 21, which offers small loans and a wide range of errands and services. In three years the centre has financed over 1,000 micro-businesses, most of them small shops. Despite easy credit terms, the government has a hard time recovering its loans, but Enda, which lends at 17 per cent, has a 98 per cent reimbursement rate. Espace 21 is also a recreational and training centre for disadvantaged youth. "Many turn down the training programmes we find for them because they prefer *bezness* and easy money," says director Essma Ben Hamida. "But after a few months here," she explains, "at least they learn how to live in society by the rules."

The work of Enda and other organizations shows that the state "could do better by teaming up with civil society," concludes Mahjoub—in other words, by democratizing public life. ■

Sophie Boukhari

In the former Eastern bloc, a hazardous transition

Omar Noman*

What should the state do in a region where poverty is making a horrific comeback?

In the former Eastern bloc, strong central government virtually wiped out poverty through wealth redistribution mechanisms. But as the region undergoes political transition, the state is no longer up to the task, and poverty is making a horrific comeback. Even the former middle classes now rank among the impoverished.

In the vast, ethnically diverse Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Eastern Europe, the breakdown of central planning and in many cases, the absence of effective state institutions to cushion the jolt, have led to the most acute poverty and welfare reversals in the world.

In 1960, the 20% of world population living in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20%—by 1995 their income was 82 times as much.

Based on a daily four dollar benchmark—considered the minimum required to survive—the number of poor increased by over 150 million in seven years, a figure greater than the total combined population of France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Since the 1998 financial crisis in Russia, the ranks of the poor are estimated to have swelled by a further 20 million. What's more, in this decade dollar-a-day poverty has made a comeback: in Romania and Bulgaria, five per cent of the population lives below that level.

Eastern bloc transition countries were the only ones in the world to have recorded a decline in national incomes from the start of the current decade up to the present. The declines have been as great as 60 per cent in some cases. A region that had virtually no inflation under the previous system suddenly experienced the most acute price instability in the world, with prices rising in excess of 500 per cent per year between 1990 and 1995.

It is also the only region in the world to have witnessed a decline in men's life expectancy, which in the Russian Federation fell from 64.2 to 57.6 years from 1989 to 1994, lower than in Egypt, India and Bolivia. Morbidity from syphilis, tuberculosis and AIDS has increased dramatically. And a system that once prided itself on having achieved near-universal literacy has suffered serious reversals. In Central Asian countries, the poverty of families has become a major impediment to school attendance, and research in several countries suggests that there is a continued threat of illiteracy emerging amongst certain groups.

There have been many losers in the transition process.

Wavering between gradualism and shock therapy

Children for one, with a massive erosion of child allowances. In the Russian Federation, poverty rates among the under-15 group stood at 46 per cent, compared to 35 per cent for adults between 31 and 60 and 22 per cent for pensioners. With the decreasing number of child-care facilities, many women have been forced to abandon work.

But what gives poverty in this region a qualitatively different profile from that of most developing nations is the slide into precarity of those who once made up the professional middle class under socialism. Large numbers of once prestigious scientists, engineers and other highly educated specialists employed by public institutions have joined the ranks of the poor, with little apparent chance of transferring their skills to the market system and becoming part of the entrepreneurial class. Once supporters of a democratic opening, this frustrated, marginalized class is now more likely to be the first to stand behind an authoritarian regime.

This general picture merits tempering. Central European countries (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), which were independent at the time of the

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Since the onset of the economic crisis, the shop Natasha Tushnova runs in the Russian village of Novo has been nearly empty.

breakup of the Former Soviet Union but had extensive trade links with it—moved swiftly toward a market-based, private-sector dominated economy, with reasonably competent state institutions. These countries still have the lowest levels of inequality in the world. Social transfers in the form of pensions, unemployment benefits and child allowances increased relative to gross domestic product (GDP) or remained constant. The economies of the Baltic States, initially disrupted by the loss of energy subsidies from the USSR, regained momentum after a relatively short period of hyperinflation and declining output. Again, partly because they came into the Soviet fold at a later date, their state institutions remained competent and credible.

This has not been the case in the former Soviet Republics. Most of these were unable to reach consensus on the course of transition and wavered between gradualism and shock therapy. In the Russian Federation and Ukraine, reform has been paralyzed over such issues as property rights in agriculture. Public institutions, namely the law and order machinery and the tax revenue services, have collapsed, virtually destroying the government's ability to redistribute resources.

The pendulum has swung too far

In Russia, taking advantage of a political vacuum, the executive rushed through with a series of reforms that further undermined credibility in state institutions, by providing generous underhand deals in the privatization process and creating the conditions for the mafia's growth, not unlike the situation in Italy in the 19th century. In 1996, the richest 5 per cent of the population controlled a share of income equal to that of the bottom 60 per cent—and in many countries, inequality has surpassed the troubling levels found in Latin America.

From the all-intrusive state, the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. Often, the ideological inheritance dictated a rush to dismantle the state. And yet, as countries of Central Europe go to show, the state has a key role to play in the transition process. Excessive liberalization leads to private monopolies, capital flight, unpalatable levels of inequality and lack of trust in the market due to financial fraud. Strong public institutions are required that regulate financial markets and transfer resources effectively to vulnerable groups. Last but not least, reviving growth is the critical issue.

Many countries of the FSU were poised for a turnaround when the 1998 Russian crisis set them back. Still, the outlook is not comprehensively bleak. Many countries have defined their economic course, have well-educated populations, are investing in retraining manpower and moving ahead with welfare reforms and institution-building. Not including countries of Central Europe and the Baltic Republics, there are some exceptional cases.

Azerbaijan will be an important test: thanks to an easily exportable oil surplus, the country is likely to benefit from a boost in revenue (even with world oil prices as low as they are). But will it share the wealth? Many fear that wealth will stay concentrated in the hands of a small oligarchy, a nightmarish scenario.

A second group of countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Bulgaria and Romania) is beginning to post growth and take a more pro-active stance towards the future. Many are making strenuous efforts to form trade and technology links other than with Russia. But for a third group of countries—Tajikstan, Georgia (embroiled in an endless conflict), Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic and Russia—the most highly populated country of the FSU—the prospects

Excessive liberalization leads to private monopolies, capital flight, unpalatable levels of inequality and lack of trust in the market due to financial fraud

seem bleak. In Russia, it is conceivable that a fairly coherent former Communist party grouping acting like a reformist state in China could shore up public institutions without losing the momentum of reform. In the worst case scenario, the country will simply print money, return to hyperinflation, fuel social discontent and heighten political conflict.

Clearly the Russians are aware of the leverage they hold on the international stage. They have essentially defaulted on debt. Chaos in the region is too great a threat to global security to be taken mildly, making it highly unlikely that Western powers will pull back. On the contrary: the situation is likely to engage the United States in the region more than it had ever expected to be.

International agencies have an important role to play in strengthening public institutions in many new areas and some traditional ones, such as health, education and the financial sector. Recognizing that the transition process is a much more painful and systemic process than initially conceived, the Nordic countries are reviewing their aid policies towards the FSU, while the European Union is set to increase its commitment in the months ahead. ■

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● For a comprehensive analysis of development in this region, see the UNDP Report *Poverty in Transition?* 1998 (224pp., ISBN: 92-1-126100-7) http:/www.undp.org/undp/rbec

3. The people

Culture—the wild card

Ramesh Singh*

Anti-poverty projects in developing countries cannot hope to succeed unless they find leverage in local cultures

In the hills of western Nepal, a poor dairy farmer may have little more to offer his kids than milk to drink. Cut-off from the markets of Kathmandu, these farmers must barter and trade with middle-men to earn a mere pittance. About two years ago, a group of local and international non-governmental organizations decided to try and widen the farmers' financial horizons. Together, they set up a string of collection points along the highway leading to the capital so that farmers could drop off their milk daily, with the state dairy corporation looking after the supplies' delivery and sale. Before long, they ran up against a major road-block: the people manning the collection points refused to accept the milk of the Dalits—the untouchable caste which is forbidden to handle the water or food of upper castes. By not recognizing this dictate of the local culture, they had unwittingly set up a poverty-eradication project which rejected the poorest people.

What were the alternatives? Accept the local culture and try to set up an alternative market for the Dalits? Or try to break past the cultural barriers? In the end, they broke through with the support of human rights activists who streamed in from the capital to put pressure on the local authorities.

I tell this story to highlight a dilemma often ignored in discussions concerning poverty-eradication: how can we respect local culture without accepting the status quo? Local culture has become something of a sacred cow for "international development experts" in the last ten years or so. This reaction is understandable given all the wasted resources and harm resulting from attempts to "import" development projects from one situation to another. In short, just because a project "works" in one country or region of a country, it will not necessarily reap the same success in another. Some of the failed plans now appear as pure folly: telling African women to stop breast-feeding their babies, neglecting to teach children to write in their mother tongues and trying to convince farmers to grow crops their communities didn't want to eat.

A successful project clearly requires a solid understanding and respect for local culture. However, this respect should not divert us from the ultimate goal: to reduce poverty. In my experience, local culture is more often than not the cause of poverty. From The Gambia to Nepal, it is not hard to identify cultural practices that limit the potential of women, children or ethnic groups. The dominant culture is structured to keep certain individuals or groups in the service of others. It perpetuates their poverty.

I am not suggesting that the role of the outsider is to arrive in a community with a list of "needed changes". Every community, no matter how poor, has individuals with very lucid understandings of the cultural dynamics at play. These people have plans and ideas on how to improve their condition. It is the job of the outsider to understand the local culture well enough to find these people and offer support.

Gaining access into a community means gaining people's trust—a formidable challenge, particularly when it comes to the very poor. These people are "invisible". They are never the ones to greet you at the village gates but that doesn't mean they aren't watching. The challenge of gaining their trust becomes twice as difficult if you are seen staying with the relatively wealthy or powerful villagers. The poor will never trust you if you frequent the homes of those considered responsible for their poverty.

A lot of time and a little trust

Ironically, one of the most telling signs of the very poor is their silence. Organize a public meeting to discuss the needs of the community and you can be certain that those who speak the most need your help the least. The very poor are either shocked by the idea that someone is asking them to make demands or completely fatalistic about the chances of their lives changing.

A lot of time and a little trust can overcome some of this fatalism. I remember working in Sindhupalchowk district of Nepal, where after six months of meetings, a man finally felt comfortable to recount a bit of his past. This very poor farm labourer was

In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of undernourished people more than doubled between 1970 and 1990, rising from 103 million to 215 million.

© Jeremy Hartley/Panos Pictures, London

Senegalese village women discuss setting up a cereal bank.

once relatively wealthy. He traced his problems back to the year his father died. According to local custom of the Tamang ethnic group, a family must spend a tremendous amount on a funeral, with a village feast lasting several days and gifts of clothing given to neighbours. This man and his wife sold a few animals to cover the costs. The next year, his mother died and they sold everything but their house to pay for the funeral.

This man had a plan. With just one female buffalo, he could earn money by breeding the animal and selling its milk to buy back his wife's gold jewellery which was sold to pay for the last funeral. By building on these assets, his son would then be able to pay for his parents' funerals without going into debt. In short, his solution to a better life lay in preparing for death.

Seeing through a cultural cloud

This man clearly understood the cause of his poverty. He had a sound financial plan for improving his condition. But cultural conceptions would continue to reinforce his family's poverty. My role was clearly not to tell him to change his religious beliefs. But discussions continued and broadened to include other villagers and community groups, and before long they decided to work with the Lamas, the religious leaders, to curtail the influence of local customs.

This "participatory approach" is not just a way of changing a community's foundations but of building on its "social capital" or solidarity. From Africa to Asia, the poorest communities have set up their own systems of mutual assistance. Basically, each household contributes money or material to a collective fund. The group then meets regularly to give that money to the family most in need. The challenge lies in building on this solidarity: to move from a safety-net to a means of improving the community's livelihood. The same co-operation can build a collective forestry project, a literacy programme or a new irrigation system.

For some experts, this solidarity is engrained in the "culture of the poor". I would like to think that poor people are somehow more caring and concerned for others' well-being. But I don't. The solidarity seems to have stronger links to livelihood needs than culture. This may sound like academic quibbling over words, but there is a tendency to let the warm glow of culture cloud our vision of the true causes of poverty. For example, I remember my initial contact with a Dalit community in western Nepal. I was taken by the strong and intricate bonds between these people. But there was no mystery involved. Generations of collective marginalization forced the community to turn inwards. The challenge lay in developing this solidarity so that the Dalits could break out of their confinement. ■

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The cultural key to empowerment

Culture, defined in its broadest sense as the totality of a society's distinctive ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge, can play an important role in overcoming poverty.

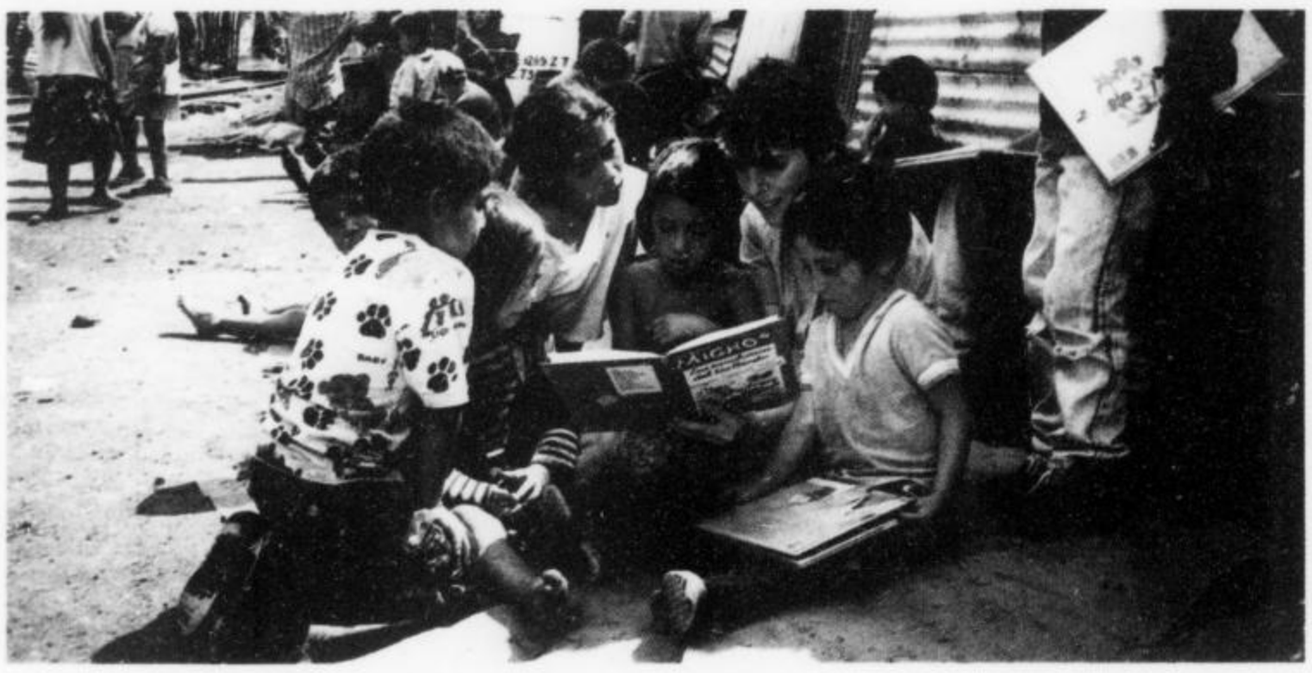
James Sengendo, a Ugandan sociologist who teaches at Makerere University in Kampala, goes even further. "To the extent that people are the ultimate objective of all development efforts," he says, "a people's culture is not only an instrument of development, but also the social basis of human development." In fact, the collective activities that communities have always practised in order to survive are based on their own systems of cultural values (see article page 35). Since the beginning of the 1990s, development specialists have been insisting on the need for active participation by the most disadvantaged in projects concerning them. According to Robert Chambers of the University of Sussex, UK, many development projects have failed because they have tried to impose in widely different local contexts standard programmes designed by outsiders. There are plenty of examples of programmes implemented in places where they turned out to be unnecessary and of projects that were not adapted to local needs.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on *Overcoming Human Poverty* stresses that the only real solution is "to empower the poor" and that this will require "increased organization and participation of all people in decision-making, and the mobilizing of social energy."

"The one who rides the donkey does not know the ground is hot," says an African proverb. Sometimes it is necessary to get one's feet burned. ■

ATD's streetwise librarians

An NGO that uses culture as a weapon against poverty and exclusion but doesn't always get a friendly welcome from the hungry



© Jean Marc Anglade/ATD Fourth World

Children in a Guatemala City shantytown read books lent by ATD Fourth World volunteers.

When Hurricane Mitch hit Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, in the evening of 28 October 1998, the first thing Carlos, Mauricio and Jaime did was to persuade families in the Nueva Suyapa neighbourhood to quit their corrugated iron and brick shacks.

As the rain fell in torrents they took the stricken slum-dwellers to improvised shelters in schools and churches. Then the three volunteer workers with ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental humanitarian organization, went back to rescue their street library. They collected the children's books, crayons, sheets of paper, scissors and modeling clay displayed on the green plastic sheet that for some years they had regularly been taking to the city's poorest districts, and returned with their precious cargo to the refugee shelters. Along with some 160,000 other ATD Fourth World volunteers and 300 paid staff members in 30 countries, they have been waging a "war on poverty through culture"—at the risk of shocking the very poor whose other needs are much more glaring.

Not by bread alone

Reinforcements soon reached them from neighbouring Guatemala and from France, where ATD Fourth World is based. The newcomers brought puppets with them as well as shovels to clear the rubble. In the end the shovels were hardly used, but the puppets worked overtime. While rescue workers gave emergency assistance, ATD Fourth World's "cultural activists" helped the hurricane victims keep their spirits up by lending them books and performing sketches.

"Everybody, especially society's poorest members, needs culture as much as bread. Not before or after bread, but at the same time." That is the basic tenet of ATD (Aid in Total Distress), which was founded in 1957 in a camp for homeless families in the Paris suburb of Noisy-le-Grand by Father Joseph Wresinski. First the priest invited actors to perform Sophocles' *Antigone* in the muddy, ramshackle settlement. Then he laid on an exhibition of original works by Picasso, Braque, Miro and Léger. "Culture is a fundamental right," said Father Wresinski, "but the shame the poorest people have to endure cuts them off from that right." He wanted culture "to cease to be a privilege" and to help people outside mainstream society "believe in their own culture and in their intelligence."

ATD Fourth World began working in Central America in 1979. On the edge of Tegucigalpa's huge city dump, needy people of all ages jostle for position whenever a garbage truck arrives. They eke out a meagre living by scavenging through the rubbish. ATD Fourth World volunteer Régis De Muylder has not always been given a warm welcome when he has turned up with his green plastic sheet. "We don't want your books," he was often told. "Here we have to fight to eat. Our children are dying of hunger." But De Muylder refused to give up, and today adults and children stop work when he and other volunteers arrive. "Leave them alone," says veteran garbage picker Don Antonio. "They're here to help us, not to judge us." Don Antonio has himself learned how to write in order to describe "what he has gone through" to his children. He finds it too hard to tell them about such grim experiences.

Street libraries have been set up in 25 countries in the North and the South. Their main aim is to encourage children of school age to enrol in school, or if they have dropped out to go back to the classroom. ATD Fourth World says that unless people learn how to read or write they cannot hope to escape from poverty. Volunteers familiarize the most disadvantaged young people with a variety of teaching materials in order to persuade them that ignorance is not inevitable and that they can go to school without feeling ashamed. Parents are patiently handled so as to get them used to the idea of sending their children to school.

Another objective is to bring children, teenagers and adults together and encourage them to respect each other and get on together. "We're not trying to entertain the poorest people or organize neighbourhood events," says Jean-Marie Anglade, a one-time chemical engineer who is now an ATD Fourth World staff member. "Our goal is to build self-confidence in people who are outside the mainstream and to help them see their strengths," so that they can recover their human dignity, make their voices heard and assert their rights. ■

Martine Jacot

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Madagascar: a waning tradition

In the uplands of northern Madagascar, the villagers of Ambingivato shaped their community's future with their own hands. But this kind of collective action is fading fast

Seven million people die each year of curable diseases and 800 million have no access to health care.

In Ambingivato, a village with a hundred or so inhabitants, is five hours' walk from Ambararata, the nearest town accessible by vehicle. For the past 20 years it has had a hospital and a school which serve four neighbouring villages. This sounds a bit grand, as the hospital is just a couple of big white-washed rooms, one of them a maternity ward and the other for receiving patients. The school consists of two huts built of *tanimanga* (clay), each with four rooms in which children of different ages and educational levels mix.

But makeshift though it is, the hospital has meant that mothers-to-be no longer have to suffer the ordeal of bumping along all the way to Ambararata in a cart drawn by two oxen. The school is equally modest but it provides an education for the local children.

Both were built by local farmers themselves following a decision by the *fokonolona*, a kind of community assembly and a political institution dating from pre-colonial times. Any project initiated by the *fokonolona* becomes a public facility and is respected as such.

To the Malagasy, the term conjures up a picture of solemn meetings at which the community gathers to decide its future. One of its regular functions, for example, is clearing roads after the heavy December and January rains. Each year at this season, Ambingivato is cut off from the other villages by *godrampotaka*, the very thick grey mud that is typical of Madagascar's rural areas, and its people are prevented from exporting rice and coffee via Ambararata to Befandriana Avaratra. The menfolk set to work with shovels to clear the blocked roads.

Unaware of new concepts of "community development" and "local participation" and well before Western NGOs arrived in Madagascar, Ambingivato's *fokonolona* was thinking about how to improve local conditions without calling on any outside help. To build their school and hospital, the villagers divided up the work among themselves. The children went down to the Anjingo River to gather rocks, the men broke them into small pieces to use as foundation material and men and women together hauled earth which was mixed with rice straw to make big bricks for the walls.

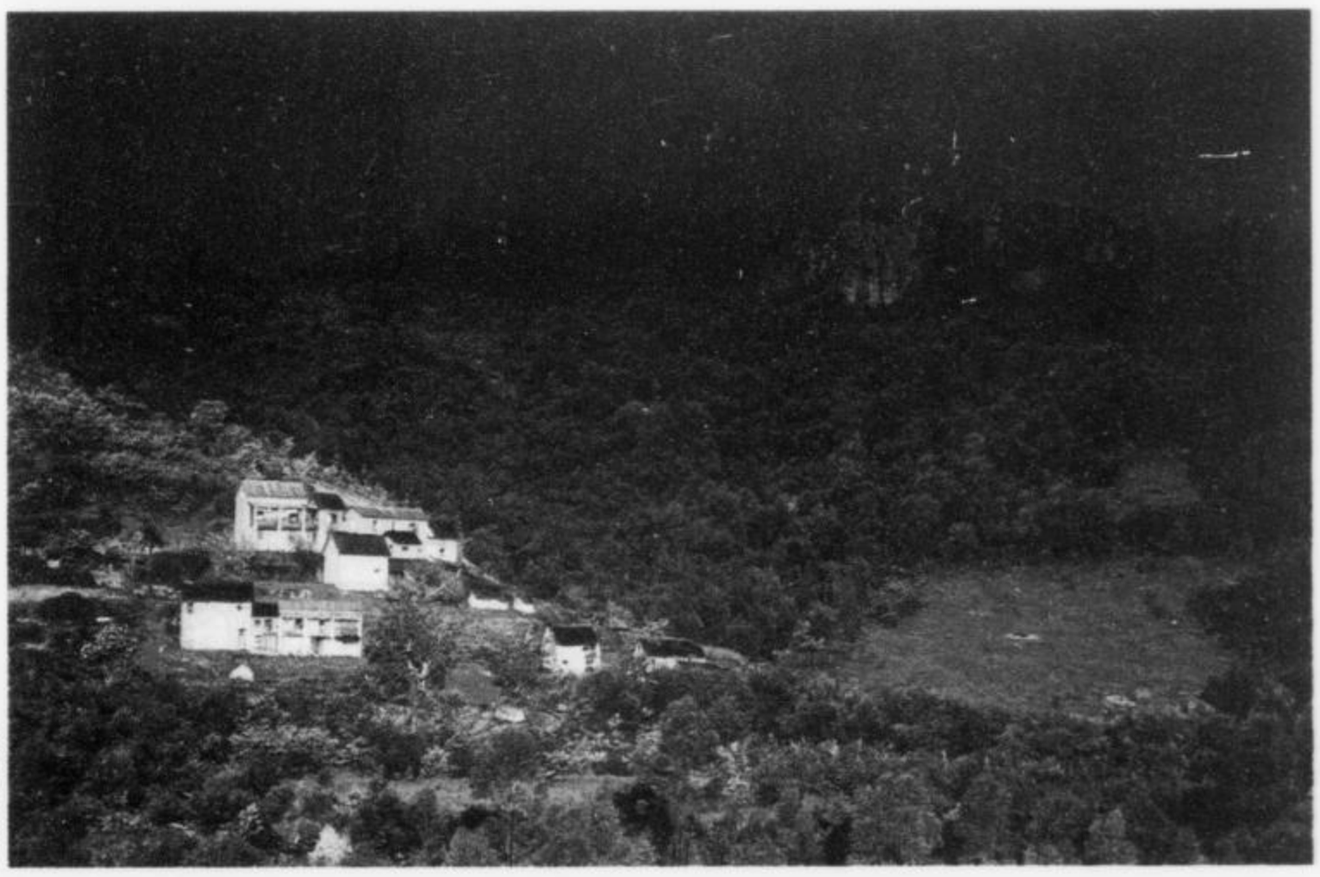
To raise funds in an economy where cash is little used, the *fokonolona* held fairs and organized *hotely*—small inns where women served rice, ox meat and poultry to the people from surrounding villages, who would buy tickets for the occasion in advance. At the fairs, where 1970s music was played on old gramophone records, the young and not-so-young came to eat, have a good time and spend a bit of money. The cash raised went to buy things like the hospital's expensive corrugated iron roof and to build one of the school's two huts.

At the fairs, where 1970s music was played on old gramophone records, the young and not-so-young came to eat, have a good time and spend a bit of money

The other part of the school still has a thatched roof. Now, after many years, it is time to replace it with corrugated iron and mend the mud walls weatherbeaten by gale-force winds sweeping in from the Indian Ocean every year.

But the Ambingivato *fokonolona* is no longer so energetic and is less enthusiastic about the school than it once was. The fall in coffee prices in the last 20 years, the death of elders who handed down customs, the exodus of young people and the lack of local prospects may help to explain why all the Ambingivato *fokonolona* does these days is clear the roads. Times have changed. In recent years, many non-governmental organizations have been busy in Madagascar. They bypass the *fokonolona*, and do everything from providing water supplies to refurbishing schools. The projects are useful and local people take part in them. But the initiative comes from the outside. Instead of taking their own decisions and doing the job themselves, people are now content to wait for others to do it for them. ■

Soahangy Mamisoa Rangers,
Paris-based Malagasy journalist



Madagascar has a long tradition of village solidarity.

© Gamma, Paris

Another lost decade?

Thierry Lemaresquier and Mümtaz Keklik*

The economic crises of the late 1990s hit harder than those of ten years ago. How can the world's poor be sheltered from the uncertainties of a globalized economy?

At the end of the 1980s, when East and Southeast Asia were starting to set the pace not only for economic performance but also for reducing income poverty, a weakened sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America were painfully emerging from a lost decade.

A string of disasters in the 1990s—economic crisis, debt and political paralysis—wiped out the advances these continents had made over the preceding 20 years and plunged new sectors of their population into poverty. The same kind of striking contrasts can be seen in a survey of the 1990s—new catastrophes afflicting entire regions and dashing hopes of a substantial world-wide reduction of poverty at the dawn of the third millennium.

The crisis that has gripped East Asia since 1997 has jeopardized at breathtaking speed the hard-won economic achievements of the last 30 years. In the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, what is politely called a "transition" has, for want of the economic, legal and political infrastructure needed for the switch to a market economy, led to a collapse in real wages and a dizzying rise in income disparities. In sub-Saharan Africa, the hopes raised by the recent resumption of growth in some countries have been cancelled out by the AIDS epidemic.

Do the 1990s already represent a lost decade? As we emerged from the 1980s, despite all the economic disruptions, improvements in such fields as adult literacy, life expectancy and infant mortality helped to limit the negative impact of loss of income by many people. Unfortunately the same cannot really be said of the crises which East Asia, the "transition" states of Eastern Europe and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are facing today. Why?

The short-term effects of a recession can be cushioned by various macro and micro-economic measures, including maintenance of social spending and extending society's safety nets. But when the crisis is so violent that it sweeps away most of the progress made in the field of human development, the situation is quite different. The solutions then call for the use of not just the standard economic measures but also for a long-term commitment to making social policy more effective and reforming the institutions which ultimately make possible a genuine redistribution of income.

The fight against human poverty needs more time than the fight against income poverty alone. This disparity is probably even greater in countries particularly subject to economic instability (East Asia), or where the socio-economic system has suffered a major shock (the former Soviet Union), or where the human development potential is still a long way from being fully achieved (sub-Saharan Africa).

The extraordinary way in which apparently entrenched situations can be reversed in the struggle against poverty throws sharply into question the "sustainability" of the policies followed so far and also of those which are going to have to be adopted to tackle the long-term human consequences of crises which can be solved relatively quickly in narrowly economic terms. A new challenge for the start of the 21st century is how to set up mechanisms to guarantee human security in the face of the multifarious risks inherent in a globalized economy. ■

The short-term effects of a recession can be cushioned by various macro and micro-economic measures, including maintenance of social spending and extending society's safety nets

* Thierry Lemaresquier and Mümtaz Keklik are respectively director and consultant in the Social Development and Poverty Elimination Division of UNDP's Bureau of Development Policy.

Of the 4.4 billion people in developing countries, nearly three-fifths lack basic sanitation. Almost a third have no access to clean water. A quarter do not have adequate housing.

Genetic **weapons:** a 21st-century nightmare?

The spectre of new biological weapons made possible by the mapping of the human genome makes it more urgent than ever to prevent biotechnology research from being hijacked for evil purposes

© Jacques Langevin/Sygma, Paris

It sounds like science fiction, but like many another prediction that was once dismissed as far-fetched it may become a reality.

Scientists have warned that recent advances in biological research could eventually lead to the creation of a new type of biological arsenal capable of targeting a specific group of human beings with common genetic characteristics, as may be the case with certain ethnic groups.

"It will unfortunately be possible to design biological weapons of this type when more information on genome research is available," says Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of science and health policy at the British Medical Association (BMA), the body which represents the medical profession in the United Kingdom.

This terrifying prospect may be an unwelcome piece of spin-off from research being carried out under the Human Genome Project (see box), an international scientific effort to map and sequence the genes in the human body and find out more about human DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the molecule which provides the biological instructions to make a human being.

Repairing defective genes

Late last year, genome research achieved a breakthrough when scientists for the first time deciphered the full genetic programming of an animal. The creature was a microscopic roundworm known as *Caenorhabditis ëiegans*, but because worms and humans have turned out to share many genes in common, the worm genome is regarded by biologists as an essential basis for understanding how the human genome works. ▶

Scientists say a detailed understanding of genetic mechanisms of human beings will help them to find out the causes of many diseases. For example, knowledge of an individual's genetic make-up will enable doctors to predict whether or not a specific drug will work on a particular patient, allowing therapies to be more accurately targeted. Similarly, genetic testing for predisposition to a range of illnesses could become feasible, and by using what is known as gene therapy doctors would be able to replace deficient genes or repair defective ones.

However, genome research may turn out to have a grim downside.

It has proved that biologically there are more similarities between human beings than differences, further dissolving traditional prejudices of race and ethnicity. However, differences do exist, and if investigations provide sufficient data about ethnic genetic differences between population groups, it may one day be possible to target the groups with dangerous micro-organisms.

One specialist who takes this eventuality very seriously is Malcom R. Dando, Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University, England. In *Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity*, a newly published report which he wrote for the BMA, he examines the whole question of how the revolution in biotechnology might be used to attack the genetic constitution of an ethnic group.

"The social and ethical safeguards which may prevent ethnic conflict and weapons development need to be discussed urgently," he said in an interview. Although scientists agree that the technology to produce ethnic weapons is not a reality now, some feel there is a real chance that it may be developed within the next ten years. "No need to wait till the project is completed. Efforts to regulate genetic research should begin now," says Dando.

Prof. Dando says the world community is already struggling to eliminate existing biological weapons. These weapons, which carry agents spreading deadly diseases like anthrax and other lethal toxins, can devastate human beings without causing damage to buildings or infrastructure. Experts say that a few hundred kilograms of a "weaponized" bacterial preparation has the potential to wipe out up to three million inhabitants concentrated in a city like New York.

'The social and ethical safeguards which may prevent ethnic conflict and weapons development need to be discussed urgently'

The apartheid regime in South Africa is widely believed to have developed forms of biological weaponry for use against the black population. In the past, however, countries have rarely used such biological weapons in warfare, partly because of their fear of eliminating friendly populations and killing their own combatants. The new developments in genetic research described by Professor Dando would remove these limitations.

Genetic information is already being used in some countries to "improve" biological weapons, e.g. by equipping them with agents to provide increased antibiotic resistance—and it is likely that this trend will accelerate as the knowledge and understanding of its applications become more widely known.

In the hands of terrorists or cult groups

The problem of the proliferation of biological weapon research has been aggravated by fall-out from the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Most of the nearly 30,000 scientists who were involved in biological research in the USSR during the 1980s are now out of a job because of the country's economic difficulties. Last year, some of them disclosed that they had been approached by certain countries which have shown particular interest in learning about microbes that can be used in war to destroy or protect crops, as well as genetic engineering techniques that could be used to make deadly germs for which there may be no antidotes.

Dando argues that scientists in countries that belonged to the former Soviet Union should be diverted from involvement in programmes with sinister motives by schemes such as scientist-to-scientist exchanges, joint research projects and the conversion to civilian use of laboratories and institutes once associated with the Soviet military effort.

One prospect that alarms arms control experts is that biological weapons will fall into the hands of terrorist or cult groups. Twelve people were killed and 5,000 injured

Genome research: **hopes** and **dilemmas**

The Human Genome Project (HGP), which began in 1990, is an international 15-year $3-billion initiative to trace and identify all the 60,000 to 80,000 genes (the human genome). International in scope, it has been described as the largest scientific research effort ever undertaken in the biological sciences. It is also seeking to determine the complete sequence of 3 billion sub-units of human DNA (deoxribonucleic acid), the molecule which codes genetic information and provides the biological instructions to make a human being. At least 18 countries have established genome research projects, and about 1,000 individuals from 50 countries are members of the Human Genome Organization (HUGO), which helps to coordinate international collaboration.

About 17 per cent of the genes had been sequenced by late 1998, and the project is expected to be finished by 2003, the year that marks the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the structure of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick.

Determining the sequence of the DNA bases in the entire human DNA will eventually determine where genes are located and what instructions are carried in a particular section of DNA. This information will be used by researchers to understand the function of genes and how they cause disease. Genome research has already helped scientists to identify genes associated with diabetes, breast cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

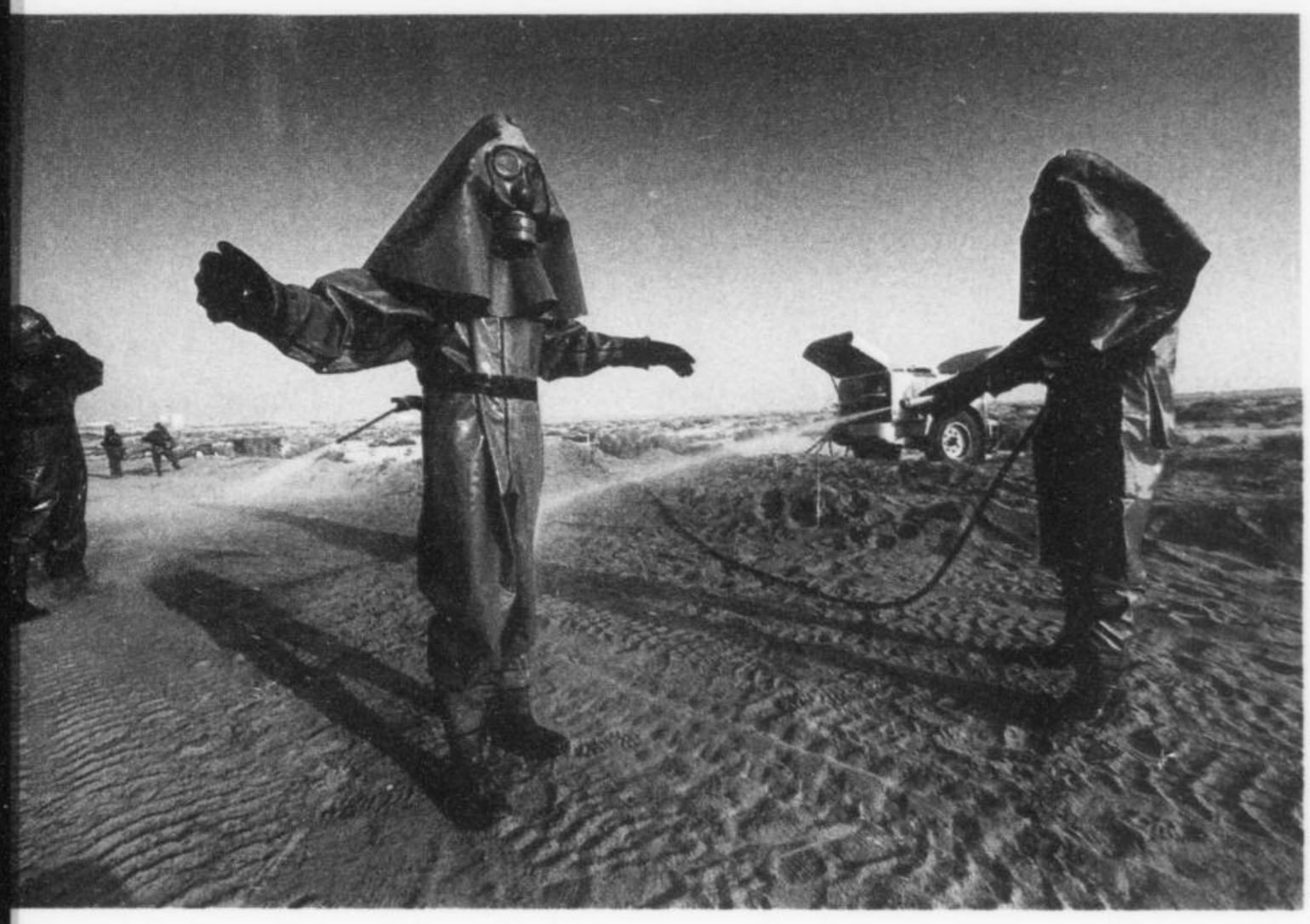
The project also opens up an array of ethical dilemmas relating to such questions as genetic testing for predisposition to hereditary diseases and the possible use of genetic information about individuals for commercial purposes (e.g. insurance) and the sharing of knowledge between rich and poor countries. Another key issue is that of the intellectual property of researchers, especially since private companies have entered the gene-mapping race.

UNESCO has adopted a Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights which was endorsed by the United Nations on 9 December 1998. Among its stipulations is the following: "No one shall be subjected to discrimination based on genetic characteristics that is intended to infringe or has the effect of infringing human rights, fundamental freedoms and human dignity." ■

E.A.

Useful websites

- **http://www.gene.ucl.ac.uk/hugo (The Human Genome Organization)**
- **http://www.nhgri.nih.gov (The National Human Genome Research Institute)**
- **http://www.ornl.gov/hgmis (Human Genome Project Information)**
- **http://www.tigr.org (The Institute for Genomic Research)**



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in the Tokyo subway in 1995 in an attack launched by the Aum Shinrykyo cult using sarin, a lethal nerve gas that produces asphyxia. Investigations later revealed that the cult group had had no problem in recruiting scientists to work on biological weapons but could not employ the weapons due to lack of a proper delivery system.

As a first step in coping with the problem of potential new biological weapons, arms control experts are calling for the bolstering of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), an international treaty signed in 1972. The convention prohibits its signatories from developing, producing, stockpiling and acquiring biological weapons.

Dando points to the fact that though 142 nations have signed the convention so far, this has not deterred countries from developing or obtaining knowledge on biological weapons. "This is mainly because there is no verification system attached to the convention," he says.

Monitoring the uses of genome mapping

"The threat of new genetic weapons is clearly going to be an ongoing problem for the international community," says Michael Moodie, President of the U.S.-based Chemical and Biological Arms Control Institute. "Such weapons are covered by the current treaty, but this needs to be strengthened by an effective verification protocol and fully implemented so we can be sure states comply with their obligations. A variety of tools should be used, including arms control, export controls and enhanced intelligence capability to monitor countries of concern."

The BMA report cited earlier says professional scientists and physicians should shoulder their ethical responsibilities and take no part in biological and genetic weapon projects. It calls for close monitoring of developments in biotechnology worldwide and open debate, particularly in relation to the use of genome mapping. However, "These measures can minimize the threats but not eliminate them," says Nathanson.

There is also growing concern about the misuse of genetic information available on Internet. Scientists worldwide share information on new findings in biological research through Internet which could be manipulated by private groups. Nathanson says Internet service providers have an ethical obligation to ensure information on biological weapons is not available on their websites.

One big problem in monitoring is how to distinguish between research carried out for good and evil ends. The fact is that genetic research which develops specific therapeutic agents is scientifically indistinguishable from research to develop a lethal or disabling agent targeted at specific clusters of genes in an ethnic group. This makes it all the more necessary to make sure that information is used for positive purposes.

According to Dando, one avenue to be explored is to ensure that developing countries are given the opportunity to share the benefits of the modern revolution in biotechnologies which can be used for disease control and economic development. In return they would be required to promise that malign research would not be carried out in their laboratories. "This is currently being negotiated by countries which are party to the BTWC," he says. ■

Ethirajan Anbarasan

Cleaning up the net

As the world wires up, police are grappling for a solution to a growing problem: the Internet is unleashing a frightening wave of child pornography.

Circulation of child porn is growing exponentially, according to experts at a recent UNESCO meeting on the issue. A few years ago, Interpol raids on suspected paedophiles turned up a small number of videos and magazines, according to Agnes Fournier de Saint Maur of Interpol's Specialized Crime Unit. Last year, Operation Cathedral, a major international police crackdown on cybersmut, led to the arrests of 96 people in 12 countries, with a half-million images stockpiled in U.S. computers alone.

Experts say the feeling of anonymity in downloading images helps netizens weave intricate networks to exchange pornographic materials. This appears to fuel both demand and supply of child porno.

To aid police crackdowns on these networks, governments are tightening legal loopholes. However, differences in national laws are proving to be an obstacle. In the UK, for example, police cannot effectively attack the source of the materials because about 95 per cent of them comes from abroad. The largest concentration of child porn websites is found in Japan, where it is not an offence to possess and distribute child porn.

Police are also running into a technological barrier: computer encryption codes used to circulate materials secretly. Pressure is building on software companies to reveal these codes, while Internet service providers are coming under fire for not closing dubious websites. Fournier de Saint Maur says that if the computer industry doesn't act fast to clamp down on child porn, "then it may well be that the judicial system will do it for them."

Threats like this are rattling human rights groups. Do we want police setting up guidelines to censor the Internet? Human rights groups note encryption is not just used by pornographers, but also by political dissidents trying to exercise a basic right: freedom of expression. ■

Tracking down

Drawing up accurate inventories of art treasures is an essential first step in the fight against massive international trafficking

In economic terms, illicit trafficking in cultural property ranks alongside international illicit trading in arms, drugs and tobacco. Today, international efforts to stop it rely not only on legislation, but also on an approach which is by no means universally applied—thorough cataloguing.

Imagine that your car has been stolen and that when you go to report the theft you can't remember what model it is. You can't say in what year it was manufactured or what its registration number is, and you certainly haven't got a photo of it. Even if the police find it within 24 hours, they won't know whose it is, and what's more you'll have a hard time proving that it was yours in the first place.

This is often the case with works of art which have been stolen from museums or religious buildings or have been looted or traded in questionable circumstances in wartime. One day they may be seized by customs officials or turn up on the art market without their legitimate owners being able to prove their case.

© Luc Ionesco

© Claude Jacques, Paris

Bas-reliefs from the temple of Banteay Chmar (Cambodia) before and after looting.

Three terra-cotta heads stolen in Nigeria in 1994. They were seized by the French police and restored to Nigeria in 1996.

© OCBE, France

The many organizations that are engaged in combating the illicit trade in cultural property, including national police forces, Interpol (the International Criminal Police Organization), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) and UNESCO, are now moving beyond their traditional concern with the theft aspect of the problem and emphasizing prevention rather than cure.

They encourage personal and electronic surveillance of works of art in places where they are exhibited, but this solution is not always affordable. They also say that taking photographs and making detailed inventories and keeping them in a safe place can be a more effective way of tackling the problem of theft than might appear at first sight.

The Getty Information Institute, which is part of the Los Angeles-based Getty Foundation in the United States, has been working for some years on a project to develop a new international standard, called Object ID, intended to simplify and rationalize the description of works of art and antiques. The project, which has UNESCO's backing, does not exclude any of the existing methods. One great advantage is its simplicity—a record is made of each art work, giving its measurements (size and weight), the material it is made of (such as bronze, wood, oil, etc.), the subject, the date, the author and other data.

Interpol regularly publishes details of the most wanted works of art. It is currently putting the finishing touches to a CD-ROM and testing an electronic system which will enable any of its offices to know within minutes whether an object appears on any of the lists of stolen art. It will be as simple as sending an e-mail to the database at Interpol headquarters in Lyons (France) and getting back a coded message, which may even include a picture of the object concerned.

No country is safe

Meanwhile, the International Council of Museums published a "Red List" of African art works at the end of 1997, highlighting objects that are particularly likely to come from illegal or clandestine excavations. For ICOM's Valérie Jullien, "This is something like a list of endangered animal species. It concerns objects from sites in the Niger Valley, Chad or Cameroon that are systematically looted, resulting in the destruction of archaeological sites month after month, thereby removing any possibility of reconstructing the history of the objects, of the civilizations from which they came and of the people who made them." The list is intended to be open-ended and could therefore be applied to endangered objects in other areas of the world, adds Jullien.

All the organizations involved agree that illicit trafficking is a scourge from which no country is immune. In Africa, there have

looted art

© National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria

been thefts from the national museums of Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Nigeria and the former Zaire, to mention only a few. In Latin America, indigenous communities such as the Coroma of Bolivia are fighting to recover ceremonial fabrics (*q'ipis*), and any observant visitor to Mexico City's National Anthropological Museum cannot help noticing the gaps left in some of its display cases where objects have disappeared in mysterious circumstances.

© Archaeological Laboratory of the University of Ouagadougou

These statues from Burkina Faso (above) and Nigeria (above right) feature on the "Red List" of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

Europe and North America have not been spared. Camille Corot's painting *Le Chemin de Sèvres* (1885) vanished from the Louvre museum in Paris one Sunday in May 1998, during peak visiting hours. According to Interpol data, in 1997 alone, 2,476 art works were stolen in Germany, 2,944 in Russia, 2,244 in the Czech Republic and 5,569 in France. In Italy, the police reported that over 30,000 art objects were stolen in 1996, which is equivalent to the stock of an average-sized museum.

Besides the economic value represented by these objects on the international market, the damage caused by the loss of cultural heritage sometimes borders on the irreparable.

This was the case with over 100 Khmer sculptures discovered by the Thai authorities on trucks in January 1999. The pieces had been taken from the temple of Banteay Chmar, built at the end of the 12th century in north-western Cambodia by King Jayavarman VII. The bas-reliefs adorning the wall around the temple were ripped out in several places, leaving a gap over 11 metres long. According to Professor Claude Jacques, who directed an on-site investigation, this is a particularly serious case because the wall contained palaeographic inscriptions which are rarely found in surviving written documents. In other words, this particular theft amounts to the destruction of archives "that end up decorating the drawing rooms and gardens of people who cannot even decipher them." ▶

Making honesty the **best** policy

Apart from domestic legislation, states, organizations and individuals can make use of a whole arsenal of ethical and legal remedies to defend their rights in cases of illicit trade in cultural property. The most recent of these instruments is an international Code of Ethics for Dealers in Cultural Property, which UNESCO recommended its Member States to adopt in January 1999. The novelty of this Code, a kind of handbook of good conduct, resides in the fact that it was prepared with the help of the dealers themselves, who are urged to check scrupulously the origin of all the works of art in which they trade.

The 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Case of Armed Conflict was followed in 1970 by the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This non-retroactive Convention has been ratified by 89 countries.

The UNIDROIT (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995) is complementary to the UNESCO Convention, in the sense that it governs matters chiefly related to public law, while the latter concentrates on private law. So far it is binding on seven countries (Lithuania, Paraguay, Romania, Peru, Hungary, China and Ecuador). The most significant clause in the UNIDROIT Convention is the principle whereby anyone in possession of a stolen object is always bound to return it, even though the object was acquired in good faith.

Lastly, looting of the historic remains of shipwrecks throughout the world has led UNESCO to undertake the drafting of a Convention on the underwater heritage, a particularly sensitive issue in the Scandinavian countries, Australia and the Caribbean. ■

Recalling that the Angkor site, which contains some 1,200 temples spread over an area of 300 km², is part of the heritage of humanity, Cambodian Prince Norodom Sùhamomi expresses his Government's concern on the issue in these terms: "We have a heritage that is disappearing. In some places in Cambodia, ten times more sculptures have been lost in three decades than between the eighth century and the 1970s, and we now need the help of our colleagues. Even though the Cambodian authorities are doing all they can to combat this iniquitous situation, their efforts will never be sufficient because the demand in Europe and the United States is simply enormous."

Making up for the damage

Another question that arises for professionals is what to do when a stolen work of art reappears in an auction or in the back room of a none too scrupulous trader. For Valérie Jullien, there is no easy answer: "Buying it would be unethical, since it would signify encouraging this type of trafficking." Apart from the costs of the purchase itself, there could be other related expenses, such as the legal costs incurred by governments or individuals for court actions to recover their property, or the considerable costs of paying for the transfer of art works between places as far apart as Italy and Ethiopia. In some cases, lawyers' offices may provide free services or private companies may sponsor returns in exchange for publicity, but such contributions are marginal and certainly not enough to cover all the expenses.

UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation is considering setting up a fund based on voluntary contributions, and this might go some way towards solving the problem.

Differences may of course be settled with the goodwill of the parties. For instance, as a result of a court judgment followed by a friendly agreement, almost 200 objects of pre-Columbian art currently exhibited at the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Rimini (Italy) alongside their names and origins carry the following mention: "Property of the State of Ecuador". ■

Lucía Iglesias Kuntz

An ongoing **campaign**

Will the British Museum of London return to Greece the Parthenon sculptures widely known as the Elgin Marbles? This question has caused rivers of ink to run ever since 1982, when Melina Mercouri, then minister of culture of Greece, took the floor at a UNESCO conference in Mexico City and said: "I believe the time has come for these marbles to return home to the blue skies of Attica, to their rightful place, where they form a structural and functional part of a unique entity".

Athens, which will host the Olympic Games in 2004, has renewed its political and diplomatic efforts to take advantage of this event to repatriate the sculptures that Phidias carved to adorn the temple of Athena on the Acropolis in the fifth century AD. The United Kingdom argues that the sculptures were legally purchased in 1816 from Lord Elgin, who 14 years earlier had removed them from Athens with the special permission of the Ottoman sultan by whom Greece was ruled at the time.

The publication in July 1998 of a revised edition of a book by the British expert William St. Clair (*Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, Oxford University Press, first edition 1967) set the ball rolling again, since its author claims to have proof that in 1937 British Museum curators caused irreparable damage to the surface of the marbles, by scrubbing and scraping them in order to return them to what they believed to be their original colour, namely white, removing forever the honey-coloured patina that had adorned them since Antiquity.

Greek archaeologist Yannis Tzedakis, who has supported the cause of the return of the marbles for 40 years, adds that: "We are not sure whether the chemical substances used in the cleaning remain active". He calls for Greek specialists to be given access to the Museum's archives and to the actual sculptures.

Meanwhile, the British Museum is organizing a conference of experts later this year to assess the state of what it regards as its property: 56 of the 97 panels of the Parthenon frieze, 15 of its 64 metopes plus other sculptures, which together account for half the surviving pieces of the Greek temple. The British Museum argues that it offers free access to the public, that it opens seven days a week and that it receives some six and a half million visitors each year. ■

Saving **Bosnia's** heritage

How do you look after national heritage in a divided country? Since the November 1995 Dayton Accords on peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav republic has been divided into two parts—the Croat-Muslim federation and the Serb republic. But the country's historical monuments and sites are spread over the two and are a common heritage.

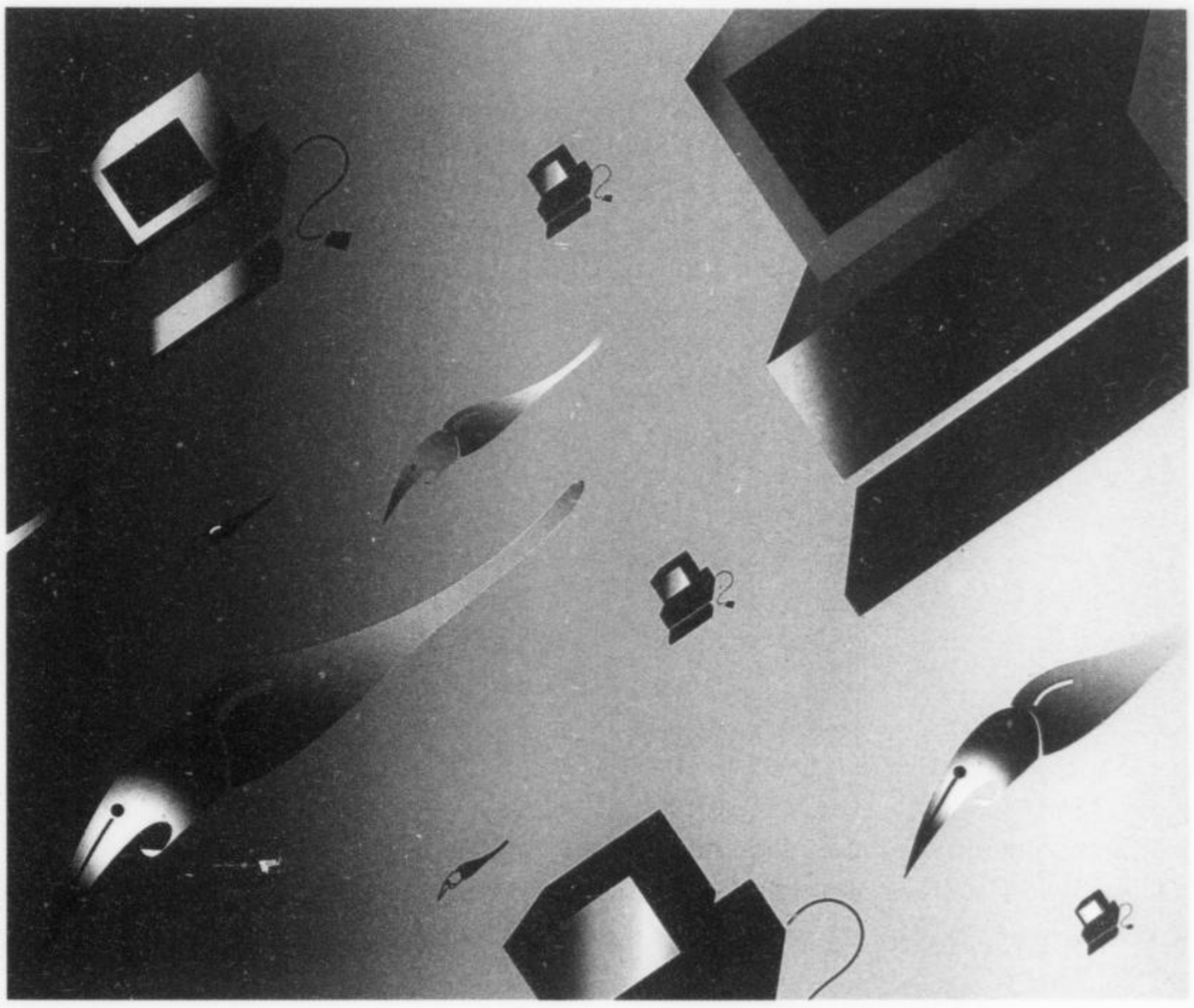
A Bosnia-Herzegovina state body, the Bosnian Institute for Heritage Protection, has the job of looking after this heritage, but with scant means at its disposal. A country exhausted by war can provide very little funding. Internal problems and lack of dialogue between the different ethnic communities have also held up passage of a law governing national heritage by the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Lack of such legislation has badly handicapped the Institute in doing its job and in appealing for funds from abroad. International organizations can do nothing in such a situation. Meanwhile, heritage sites ranging from the prehistoric to those of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires are steadily crumbling away.

But there are a few glimmers of hope in this bleak picture. In November 1998, a UNESCO-sponsored international team began the job of rebuilding Mostar's Old Bridge, which had been destroyed in the fighting. The 16th-century bridge, a symbol of links between ethnic communities, should be restored to its former glory by the year 2001. By then, it may have also have become a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Institute recently proposed that it be placed on the World Heritage List, along with part of Sarajevo's city centre.

Right now, there are no World Heritage sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But UNESCO's help would be invaluable in the task of saving what remains of the country's historic wealth of culture. ■

ONE intelligent island

Singapore is bidding to create a 'wired' economy where services converge on the Internet at an unparalleled pace to transform the island's chief resource—a well educated population—into a new breed of netizens



© David Weisman/SIS, Paris

They have been a familiar sight across Singapore recently: bronzed Indian workmen clad in fluorescent orange SCV (Singapore Cable Vision) jackets labouring under the scorching sun to lay cable for the island state's suburban neighbourhoods. The rush to cable up the island is the result of an initiative by the government to transform the entire population into netizens, hooked up by cable modem to a nationwide broadband network, at a speed 100 times faster than current ISDN Internet access.

While the idea would seem ridiculous in a country as large as, say the U.S., Brazil or China, wiring Singapore is hardly a daunting task, given a total land mass of barely 647.5 square kilometres. Dubbed Singapore ONE, the national network aims to deliver a new level of interactive, multimedia applications and services to homes, businesses and schools. The authorities claim that this effort is the first in the world to go "live" and deliver such services to a mass user base.

"Singapore ONE is more than just a communication network. It will empower Singaporeans to work efficiently in a 'smart' environment, to facilitate the use and access of information to enhance their business, personal and family lives," Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has stated.

The government considers it crucial for a resource-scarce country like Singapore to equip itself for the information age. Singapore's push to carve out a place in the global digital marketplace is especially significant in the light of the Asian financial crisis. While some Asian countries have been tightening controls on their markets, Singapore is trying to open up the economy further through a variety of initiatives, including ONE. Other Asian countries are looking on to see whether Singapore ONE may hold important lessons for them in their efforts to make the most of the information age.

With a per capita gross domestic product of $24,600, Singapore ranks among the world's top 20 richest economies. Singapore ONE is therefore not just a social service from a government to its people but rather a crucial investment in the country's only resource: its people. The government decision to commit $240 million for ONE infrastructure development reflects a commitment to upgrade the skills and knowledge of its well-educated population.

Services on offer range from banking, shopping, theatre ticket booking, and property viewing to distance learning. The various virtual colleges and scholastic programmes offer everything from engineering courses to interactive multimedia courses for schoolkids. Entertainment, like a favourite TV programme or video, is provided on demand. A chat on the phone with a friend is replaced by a virtual video conference. Instead of worrying about what the kids are doing at home, parents can keep an eye on them thanks to video-conferencing, with a webcamera sending images from home to the personal office computer.

40,000 users

Users of cable modems are charged a subsidized flat rate of about $21 a month and users of SingTel's ADSL lines enjoy a similar rate. The network began a one-year pilot phase in June 1997 and was commercially launched the following year. Only about 15,000 households have bought the package. However, the low subscription rates are offset by the growing number of users, according to officials at the National Computer Board (NCB), the main government body behind the project. "If you include users at schools, tertiary institutions, community centres and libraries, we have a conservative estimate of at least 40,000 users," said Ng Kin Yee, assistant director for programme management and new media. ▶

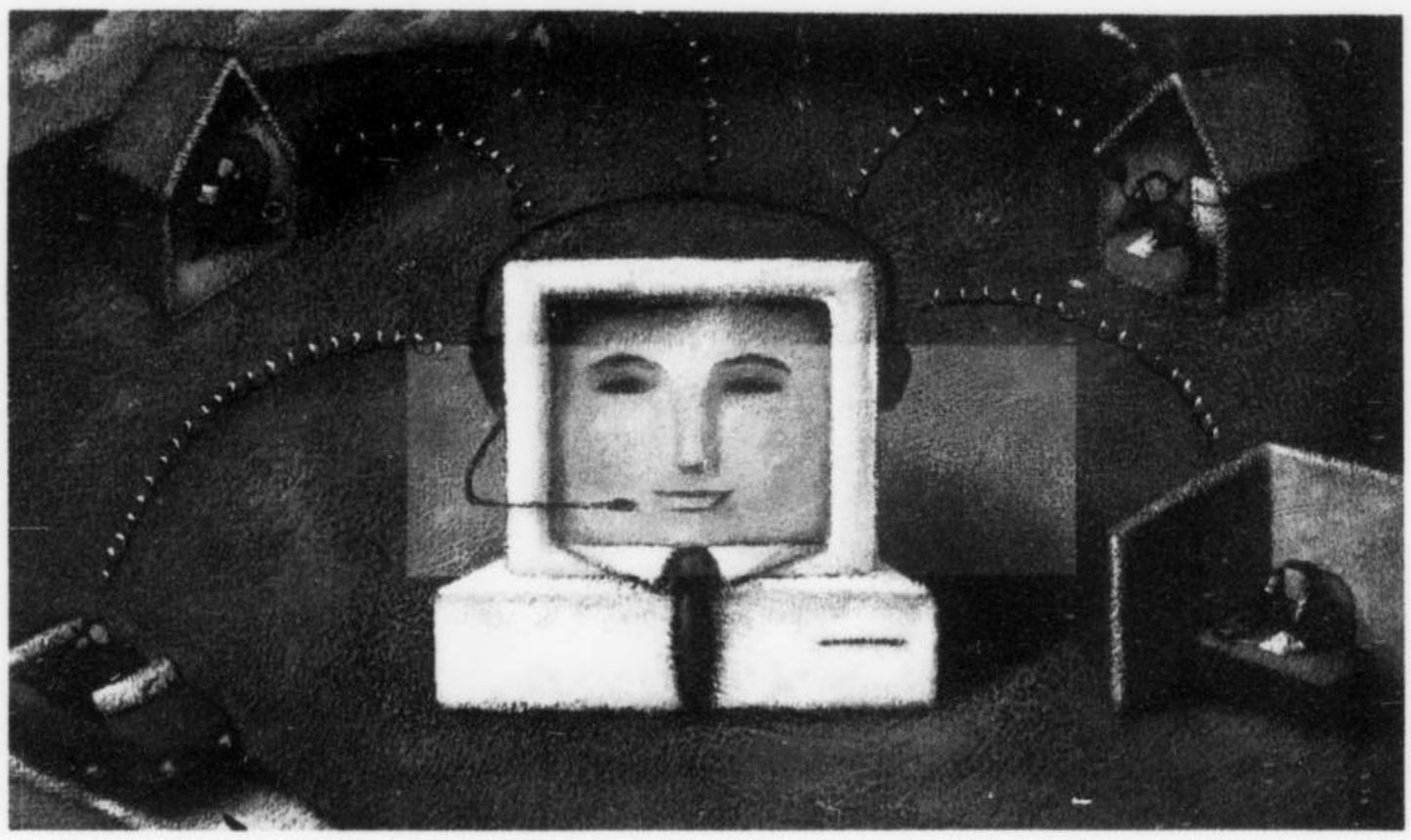
Ng says it is normal for new infrastructure products to experience a modest initial uptake. "Singapore ONE is not just about infrastructure, it's all about building the skills, the people awareness among senior citizens, children and their parents who might have had a phobia for computers," he says.

The government began laying the groundwork to create an IT-literate population for Singapore ONE in the 1980s. Today more than 40 per cent of Singapore households own a computer and more than 350,000 out of a population of 3 million subscribe to the Internet. In fact, Singapore has been recognized as the second most IT-literate country in the world after the United States by the World Competitiveness Report, which is published annually by the Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Switzerland.

E-commerce on ONE

Singapore's electronic-commerce—or e-commerce, short for buying and selling over the Internet—infrastructure is equally advanced. Online purchases can be paid through cashcards or security credit card payment systems and banks use digital certificates and smart cards to offer secure online banking. Comprehensive legislation is also being considered to provide an electronic transaction legal framework to encourage more online commerce.

"E-business is not just about E-commerce," said Howie Lau, manager for e-business solutions at Hewlett Packard Singapore. "E-business opens up tremendous opportunities for companies to further relationships with customers, partners and employees by linking internal business processes to the



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Internet. Singapore ONE could potentially be valuable for scenarios where large amounts of information or speed of transmission are factors such as the exchange of business documents with partners; sharing of common information within a community (e.g. real estate agents sharing a common database of property); realtime synchronization of multimedia; mobile employees gaining access to corporate file servers, databases. The scenarios are pretty well endless."

Already, SingTel has launched a separate ATM network specifically targeted at business-to-business transactions to complement Singapore ONE. The focus of Singapore ONE's network is to connect consumers to businesses and government. Meanwhile, SingTel's ATM network connects businesses, academic institutions and government. SingTel's ATM network will have connexions to Singapore ONE and will provide it with high speed international links. Since its launch in June last year, SingTel's ATM network has established links to Australia, Hong Kong, Japan and the U.S. There are plans for SingTel to be extended to Europe and other major Asia Pacific destinations this year.

While some analysts anticipate that business-to-business transactions will take over from the original consumer-based plan for Singapore ONE, NCB's Ng says that both sectors can grow in tandem. "One sector need not necessarily exclude the other," he insists. Currently, the 200 service providers to Singapore ONE include major supermarkets, fashion and retail outlets, banks, insurance companies and bookstores.

Retailers thinking globally

"Interactive multimedia offers infinite possibilities for retail," says Bernard Yang, manager of Nanyang Optical, one of Singapore's major optical chains which has a site on Singapore One. "Imagine a person watching a TCS (Television Corporation of Singapore) drama. The viewer likes the frame worn by Zoe Tay (popular Singapore actress), with a click of a button, up pops the Focal Point (Nanyang Optical on Singapore ONE) and he or she can buy and have the same pair delivered to their doorstep."

"Selling via the Net also means I do not have to put up with exorbitant rentals and expensive manpower. All I need is a good web designer and a system administrator plus leased line charges. If I can make the same sales on the Net that I do in my shops, then I'd be a really happy guy!"

Most retailers, like Nanyang, have a presence on the Internet as well as on Singapore ONE. Predictably, sales are higher on the Internet than on ONE, simply because of higher user rates. Yang, however, sees it as vital to establish a name for himself on ONE, which he anticipates will be the main platform for e-shopping in Singapore in the future.

Website of the month

http://www.unicef.org/bhutan

Bhutan, the little-known kingdom of 630,000 people nestled in the folds of the eastern Himalayan Mountains, has taken another step out of self-imposed isolation: the country now appears on the Web. Through a site recently created by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one quickly discovers that Bhutan is not a fossilized and romanticized Shangri-La. In fact, the development experience of Bhutan is unusual because, since it started opening up to the ouside world in 1961, it embarked upon what the World Bank, for one, calls a far-reaching development strategy, and has made substantial progress in improving living standards.

The government's growth objectives, however, are tempered by an earnest desire to preserve the country's distinctive cultural heritage and its rich natural resources base. Bhutan has been well ahead of the rest of the world in its commitment to environmental protection: for example, forest cover has increased from 60 to over 70 per cent in the past twenty years.

Bhutan joined the U.N. in 1971 and UNICEF's involvement began three years later when it started its first water supply programme. Since then, UNICEF has been involved in health, education, water and sanitation projects. The website, animated with photographs, music and videos, provides us with a glimpse of the country and its people in their everyday village lives: a health worker, a teacher, a Buddhist monk, and many others. ■

Consultants say that Singapore retailers on the Net should already be thinking globally. "Some of the most successful e-commerce websites, like Amazon.com, do business with the whole world. So if someone has a good idea that can be sold to anyone in the world, Singapore may be just as good as any other place to start," said IT consultant Jeroen Domensino. "There appears to be too much concern here right now over technicalities such as security issues. The truth is that elsewhere people are already making big money via the Net, regardless whether security issues (credit card fraud, for example) are completely resolved. In the end, I think that consumers all over the world are changing their attitude towards what's safe."

Choosing between the virtual and the real

Along with the growth in e-commerce, multimedia software companies are experiencing exponential demand. "Think of it as Hollywood. If Hollywood made movies only for the U.S., it would be a limited market. We want to be the Hollywood of multimedia," said Michael Yap, NCB's assistant chief executive. Software developers hope that via international links, they will gain publicity and future markets for their work. "But we will have to move fast," says Ng. "It's a fast growing, fast changing environment."

And in a small way, even local TV producers are anticipating demand in other markets for Singapore programmes. "There is much potential to export our culture to other countries," says James Leong of TCS Multimedia. "We would definitely like to push our content over the Internet as TCS has done for television (Singapore-produced TV series have been broadcast in Australia and Taiwan.)" Currently about half of Singapore ONE subscribers subscribe to TCS' 1-on-One service which offers made-in-Singapore TV sitcoms, dramas, news and documentaries.

While software whizzkids and plucky entrepreneurs in this little city state gear up to make their name in cyberspace, there remains a fair amount of scepticism as to whether ONE will ever be a real hit at home. A video conference chat either with the bosses or with good friends is unlikely to gain popularity over coffee or kopi-O (locally brewed black coffee) at the neighbourhood outdoor food-stall.

Likewise video-on-demand viewed from a 14-inch desktop monitor is likely to be a much less attractive option to the average Singaporean compared with watching the latest laser discs or Video CDs on the family's 31-inch stereo TV (the pride and joy of most Singapore households). And in this metropolis overbuilt with malls, real shopping as opposed to virtual, will likely remain the most popular pastime, regardless of how interactive and alluring a web-mall might be.

There will definitely be choices and options for consumers and entrepreneurs. Some will choose the virtual and some will choose the real. The authorities only hope that they will have equipped the population with the IT literacy to at least exercise that option in the next millennium. ■

Malini Rajendran in Singapore

The Web **lifestyle**

Leading the "web lifestyle" of billionaire Bill Gates should be a reality for the average Singaporean in four or five years according to the Microsoft founder. Visiting the island in 1998, Gates predicted that this would become a reality in Singapore even faster than in the U.S., thanks to the Singapore ONE initiative.

Already, dreamers at the National Computer Board have created a mock cyberflat. Picture this: Hassan, the eldest son, is lounging on his bed enjoying a romantic video-conference chat with his girlfriend in Australia. He suddenly remembers he has forgotten her birthday; a few clicks of the mouse and he has ordered flowers to be delivered to her within the hour. Meanwhile Mum is in the kitchen simultaneously cooking dinner and attending a corporate planning video conference meeting with her boss and colleagues in the US.

Halfway through the meeting, she remembers a few ingredients she's forgotten to buy. She clicks a couple of times on a mouse (while listening with apparent concentration to her colleague's business plan) and the groceries will be at her doorstep in a couple of hours. Meanwhile, baby is visible, sleeping peacefully on the "live" baby monitor screen and toddlers Noraini and Nordin are shown on yet another screen watching Discovery Channel interactively, downloading everything they ever wanted to know about elephants. Dad is in the living room folding the laundry while buying and selling shares via the Net. A split screen enables him to communicate with his office staff at the same time. Dream it might be for now, but the cyberflat inhabited by super-efficient netizens may well be, according to Gates, a reality in the near future. ■

With distributed computing, there's **strength** in numbers

Suppose you have to crack a really hefty computer problem—in technical jargon, say you want to decode a computer message written in the "56-bit encryption" common these days. In theory it's very simple: you try all possible solutions until you find the right one. But there's a problem: the total number of possible solutions is two multiplied 56 times by itself—a number which would fill almost a whole line of this column.

There are two ways to deal with this. Either you happen to have the great privilege of using one of the world's super-computers, in which case the problem will be solved very quickly, or else you resort to the old idea that strength lies in numbers.

Several websites are tackling it the second way, among them http://www.distributed.net, by drawing on the dormant capacity of the perfectly ordinary computers of some 22,000 voluntary participants. Like all computer buffs, these volunteers do not use their machines at full capacity or all the time. Any programme they use—e.g. a word-processing programme—occupies only part of the machine's capacity. And like all enthusiasts, they sometimes feel like phoning a friend or stopping for a cup of coffee. Some of them even leave their computers switched on when they're not using them.

What these volunteers do is install in their machine a small free programme which, when they connect to a central "server" by a modem, tells the server how much capacity is available in the machine. The machine then downloads the elements needed to process a tiny part of the gigantic calculating operation.

"Distributed.net", which at first took 40 days to crack the code, managed it in less than a day by this method. Others, including the University of California at Berkeley, the radio-telescope at Arecibo, in Puerto Rico, and an American UFO club are planning to call on 110,000 computer enthusiasts around the world to help analyse radio signals received from outer space in the hope of detecting signs of extra-terrestrial life. But this method of "distributed computing" can also perform more urgent tasks. ■

Ahmadou Kourouma

an African novelist's **inside** story

Ahmadou Kourouma is a writer from Côte d'Ivoire whose relatively slender but highly original output—three novels published over 28 years—draws up an eloquent indictment of the injustices imposed on black Africa

Your first novel, *The Suns of Independence*, published in 1970, has won acclaim as a masterpiece and has sold 100,000 copies. But you had a hard time finding a publisher for it. Why?

The book was rejected for two reasons. First, my style had a certain originality stemming from the particular way in which I used the French language. Some readers found this disconcerting. Second, many people disliked the conception of the novel. I had structured it in the kind of way used by the American writer John Dos Passos earlier this century. I ended the fictional part of the book with a section I would describe as documentary. After telling the story of the protagonist, Fama, I described situations and events that took place in Côte d'Ivoire at the time of the Cold War. I talked about things that might be called sensitive. Some African publishers even sent the manuscript back to me with scathing, almost insulting comments.

How did you come to master what was for you a foreign language—French?

I had no choice in the matter. I didn't know how to express myself in any other language. My English was poor, and I have never learned Arabic. In school I was only taught French and, like everyone who went to school before decolonization, I wasn't allowed to speak our mother tongue, Malinke[1]. So I had to use French to describe Malinke people and tell stories of Malinke life. Some people have criticized me for "bashing" the French language and giving it a Malinke twist.

It has even been said that you have "cuckolded" French.

Whatever people might say, I am not trying to change French. What I'm interested in is reproducing to the fullest possible extent the way my characters live and think. My characters are Malinke. And when the Malinke speak, they follow their own logic, their own way of looking at the world. That approach doesn't go into French. The sequence of words and ideas in Malinke is different from what it is in French. There is a big gap between what I describe and the form in which I express myself, a gap much bigger than the gap when an Italian speaks French, for example. I repeat, my objective is not formal or linguistic. What I'm interested in is reality. My characters must be credible and to be credible they must speak in the novel as they speak in their own language.

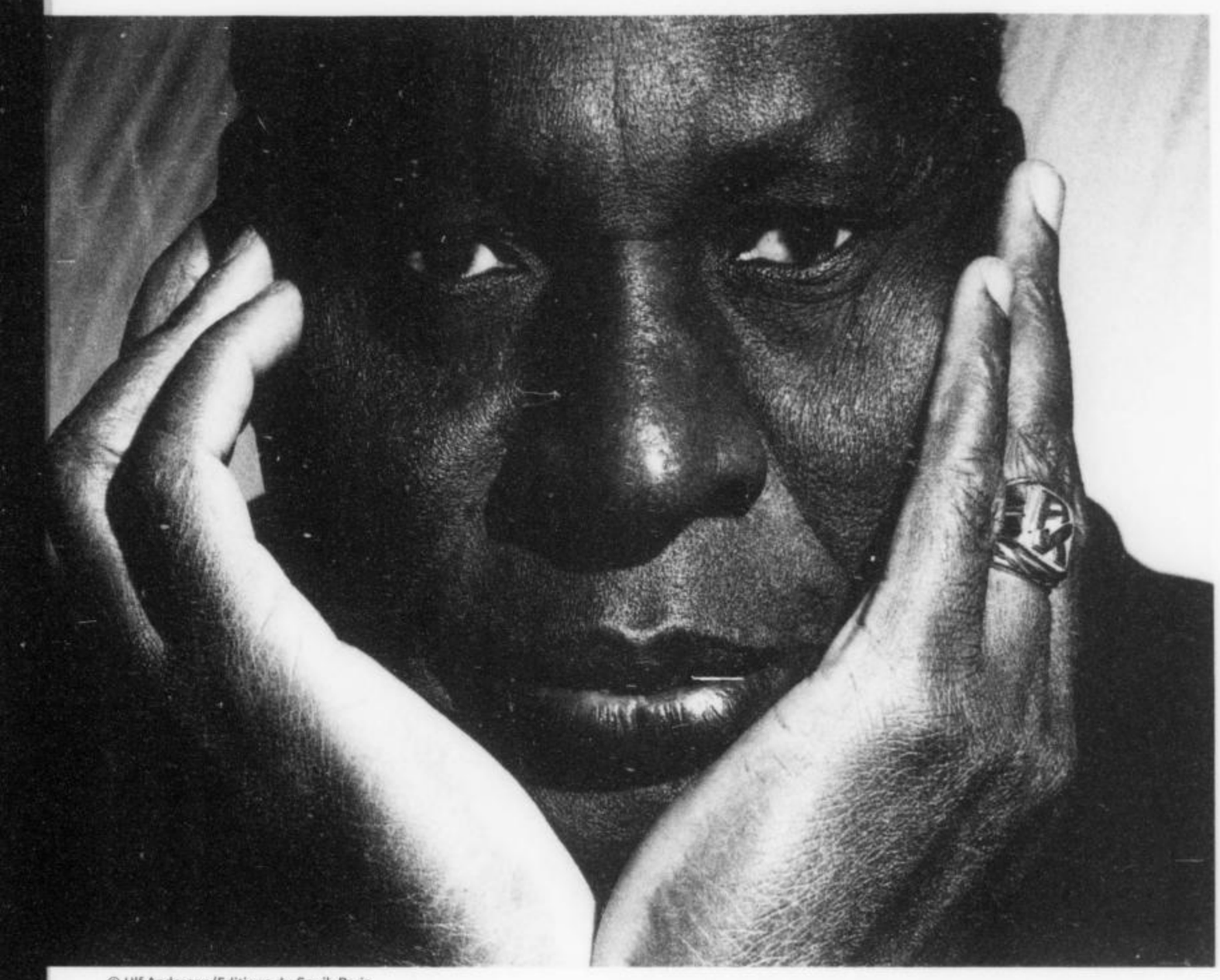
How would you describe the Malinke language?

Some people may disagree, but it seems to me that African languages are on the whole far richer than European languages. They have a wide range of words to denote one and the same thing and a multitude of expressions to describe one and the same feeling, as well as many mechanisms for creating neologisms. Malinke alone has around ten of these. African languages are rich in proverbs and sayings which people constantly refer to. So it's not surprising that sometimes we get bogged down when we use French to describe our lives and our psychological universe. The French language, on the other hand, is the product of a Catholic, rationalist civilization. That's obvious from its structure, its way of analysing and describing reality. Our language is influenced by fetishist spirituality and is closer to nature.

Western authors often speak of writing as a physical, vital, organic need. For you, it is more a way of getting a hearing.

For us African writers, writing is also a matter of survival. When I wrote *The Suns of Independence*, I wanted to campaign against abuses of social and economic power. That was a vital and absolute necessity! All contemporary French and other European writers have devoted some of their work to the four years of occupation and oppression that their countries endured during the second world war. But in Africa we had 100 years

1. The Malinke are the largest of the groups composing the Mande ethnic group. Most of them live in Guinea, Mali, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, where they make up 11 per cent of the population. Converted to Islam in the 11th century, the Malinke have ruled powerful empires which they dominated by force of numbers, arms and economic power. They are reputed to have a good head for business, and are also known as Dioulas, a word meaning "merchants" in Malinke.



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of occupation, and it's vitally important for us to talk about this and analyse its consequences and effects. We had as many massacres as Europeans did during the last war and under authoritarian Stalinist regimes. In my second novel, *Monnew*, which was published in 1990, I wanted to get across the message that we too have endured great suffering. That suffering is also the subject of the novel I recently finished. Its title is *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* ("Waiting for the wild animals to vote"), and it's based on the tragedy of the Cold War in Africa.

For us African writers, writing is also a matter of survival. When I wrote *The Suns of Independence*, I wanted to campaign against abuses of social and economic power. That was a vital and absolute necessity!

The sufferings you describe are intense and extreme. But in this novel you express gratitude to a dictator for his "courage" in telling his compatriots that they were "thieving, lazy savages."

That remark does not refer to the people "down below", as we say, but to those "on top", the dictators' buddies. Resignation was the only option for the people down below, whom I describe as "coarsened by their beliefs and their poverty, patient and dumb". The Cold War prevented African countries from finding a way out of their predicament. It kept a millstone around their necks. Foreign powers gave the orders and pulled the strings, picked the dictators that suited them and sent in their military whenever there was any resistance.

But it was the most brutal, ignorant leaders who won the internal power struggles in African countries.

Yes, and they also had to be cynical. The foreign powers needed them. Apart from a few exceptions, they didn't want bright people. Those who wanted to defend Africa, who wanted to strike a balance between the two sides by playing cat-and-mouse with them, were immediately eliminated.

But when opposition movements came on the scene at the beginning of the democratization process after the Cold War, they turned out even worse than the dictators.

That's a fact. The earliest opposition leaders turned out to be drunken, drug-addicted looters without principles or scruples. And the opposition leaders who returned after a long exile were, as I have described them, "persons alien to their country's people and ▶

Hard facts

"We African writers work in gruelling conditions," says Ahmadou Kourouma. "Writers are seldom rich anywhere in the world, but for us things are even tougher. We have fewer resources, fewer readers and fewer publishers." The only available statistics, which are not recent but are probably still valid, reveal that sub-Saharan Africa publishes three times fewer titles than the average for developing countries and 25 times fewer than that for the developed countries.

"There are two ways of writing in Africa," Kourouma says. "The first is to write about Africa and Africans. Writers denounce situations they know relatively well, and run risks by shouting out the truth. They can't expect big sales. They write for readers in developing countries, where people either can't read or can't afford to buy books. The second is to write for a wider public by tackling topics that are of interest to non-Africans as well as Africans. There are African authors living in France, for example, who write for an exclusively European readership. They are European writers even if they were born in Africa. Others manage to publish best sellers in France and are read in Africa as well, but that is more unusual.

"I think that we should try and write for everyone by presenting our problems as universal human problems. We should follow the example set by the best Latin American literature. But Africans are changing. The first African authors took up the pen to show that they too could express themselves as writers, that they too were human beings. At the time, some people had doubts about that. . . . My generation has gone further than that. We have often chosen literature as a campaigning medium." ■

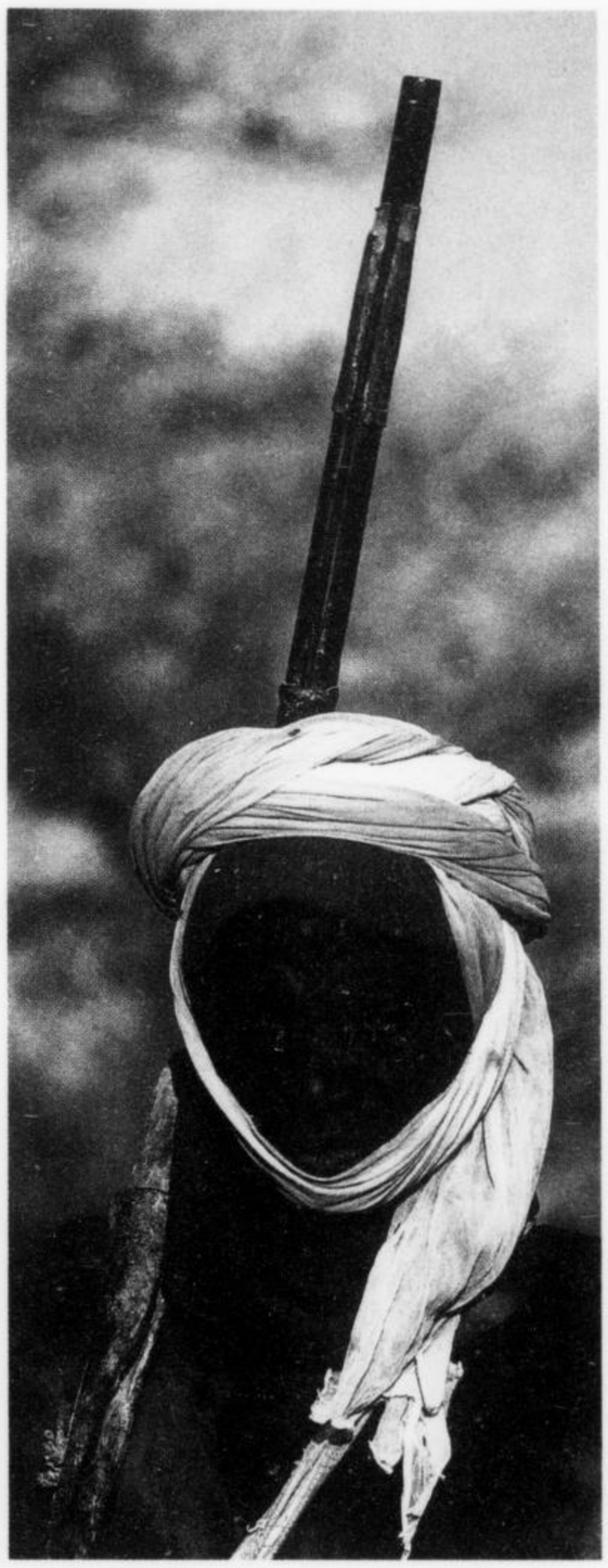
way of life" and therefore incapable of grasping what was really going on. It's true that both wanted first and foremost to take revenge and to get rich. Why? Because they all still believed in the mirage that power is all that matters.

People had given up and let their leaders behave as village chiefs did in traditional Africa. The dictators thought they could go it alone, taking decisions without even listening to their advisers. Government money was their money. All those who got rich were pawns of the government. The dictator's power was so absolute that all kinds of things were expected of him. To give you one example, in my country even today, when a fairly well-known person dies, the family still expects the head of state to pay 10,000 or 20,000 French francs ($1,800 or $3,500) for the funeral!

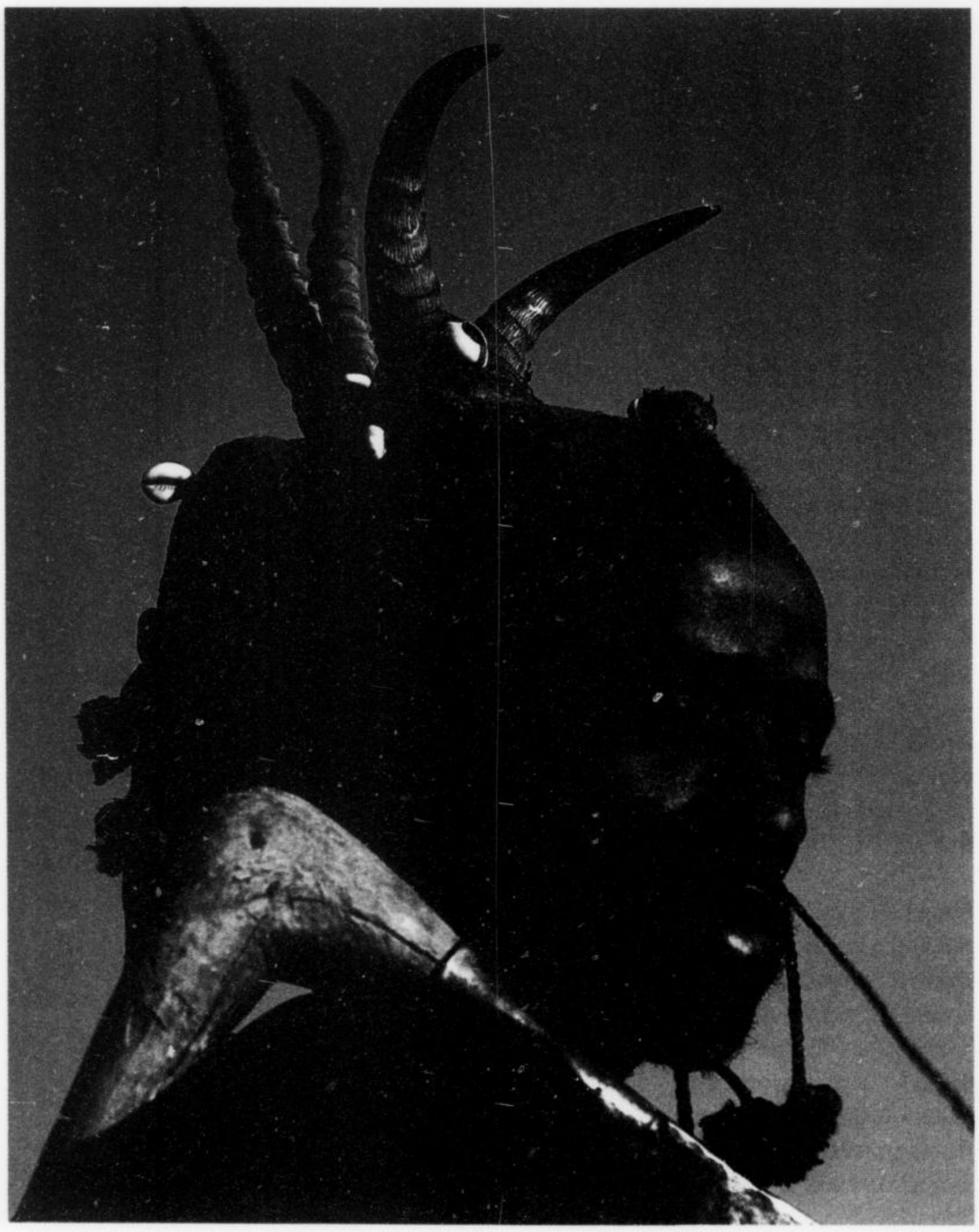
Since that's how things were, it's not surprising that democratization got off to a very bad start. The old power structure and all its works had to be destroyed, because everything revolved around them. It was impossible for anything constructive to be built on the existing foundations, not only by the corrupt dictators and their cronies, but also by the opposition leaders who came back from exile abroad and hadn't a clue about what was really going on. People always behave in the same way. As the Malinke proverb says, "The dog won't give up its awkward way of sitting."

One criticism that has been made of your most recent novel is that in Africa reality and magic seem to be inseparable. Your anti-hero, the dictator Koyaga, defeats all his adversaries largely because of the strength of his magical powers.

I don't believe in magic. And when Africans ask me why I don't, I say that if magic really existed, we wouldn't have allowed the abduction of 100 million people, of whom perhaps 40 million reached the Americas and 60 million died on the way. If magic really worked, the slaves would have turned into birds, say, and



In West Africa, hunters belong to a brotherhood which is at the top of the traditional social hierarchy.



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would have flown back home. I don't believe in magic because when I was a boy, I saw forced labour. If magic existed, the victims of forced labour would have been able to escape. But in a novel you have to describe your characters' mentality and ideas. Power and magic are inseparable in the minds of most Africans. The dictator not only has power and money, he also has the best fetishists and sorcerers. Because they are the best, the dictator is invulnerable and his power is limitless. For the dictator's entourage and for the people at large, power and magic are one.

So how can Africa be successful in a world where science and technology are increasingly important?

Rationality will gain ground at the same time as democracy, which is still far off but is slowly coming in. It won't solve every problem, but we already have its foundation stone—the spoken word. Everywhere, we say what we want, and that's quite an achievement. And one important thing we can say—and see—is that the chief's almighty power is on the way out. The press can now expose corruption and abuses of power; a leader has to campaign against his opponents in elections; it's possible to get rich without being a stooge of the government. The leader is no longer a superman. He no longer has everything going for him. He has to shoulder duties and responsibilities. He is becoming like everyone else. And consequently the magical part of his power is disappearing.

And yet at the end of your latest novel the dictator is forced to hold elections, but "if people refuse to vote for him, the animals will come out of the bush, get hold of ballot papers and elect him with a landslide majority."

Odd as it may seem, many people think that kind of thing is possible. They're even sure presidents get elected that way. But we're making some headway. Before, either there weren't any elections at all, or if an election was held, the dictator only had to ask for 99 per cent of the vote for his wish to be granted. Now he is forced to cheat. Votes from wild animals are the last refuge of dictators in distress. ■

Interview by
by **René Lefort** and **Mauro Rosi.**

- **Population: 14.7 million**
- **Density: 42 persons/km²**
- **Illiteracy rate: 57%**
- **GDP/per capita/year: $690**
- **UNDP ranks Côte d'Ivoire among the countries with low human development, in 21st position among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.**

A **singular** voice

"A week ago Koné Ibrahima had finished in the capital," runs the opening sentence of *The Suns of Independence*, meaning that Koné Ibrahima had died the previous week. It set the tone for a novel in which Ahmadou Kourouma transposed into French the speech-rhythms and images of Malinke, his mother tongue. This was a new departure in the world of French-language African literature, which had hitherto tended towards academicism. Kourouma's fiction may owe much of the originality of its form and content to its author's eventful life story.

Ahmadou Kourouma was born in 1927 in the little town of Boundiali, today a local administrative centre in Côte d'Ivoire. His father was a nurse, and as such belonged to the colonized elite. He was called "doctor" and his rank gave him the right to use the services of Africans subjected to forced labour. But Kourouma was brought up by an uncle who was on the other side of the fence. He was a master-hunter, a leading member of the brotherhood that stood at the top of the traditional social scale because of the power it enjoyed by virtue of its weapons and the magic it acquired from bonding with nature.

As a student Kourouma took part in protests at the Bamako Technical High School in Mali. Then he was drafted into the French army and ordered to Côte d'Ivoire to participate in a crackdown on the emerging liberation movement, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*. When he refused to do this, he was drafted into the French colonial army in Indochina, a posting he only accepted because Bernard Dadier, then Côte d'Ivoire's most famous writer, persuaded him that military experience would prepare him for the anti-colonial war which he believed to be inevitable.

The next stage of Kourouma's life came when he travelled to France to study science—a field spurned by most children of the African elite. He returned to Côte d'Ivoire just after independence and worked as an insurance executive, but did not stay long. "I was impervious to the magic of the single party, which claimed to be the only form of authority capable of developing the country," he says. Kourouma was jailed for a few months and eventually went into exile.

His second homecoming, in 1970, was almost as brief. When his play *Le diseur de vérité* ("The Truth Teller"), was published in 1974, it was deemed "revolutionary". So he left the country and lived in Cameroon and Togo until 1993, continuing his career in private insurance companies.

At 72, he thinks that his "generation first got things wrong and then wasn't up to the job." This was the generation that came after the birth of the concept of Negritude developed by Léopold Sedar Senghor, "who had recognized the Negro's qualities as a man, but an incomplete man. We naively believed that only colonization prevented Africans from becoming fully rounded people like any other. If Africans thieved, for example, it was because of colonialism. If colonialism ended, they would all get down to work. Everyone was going to make sacrifices for Africa. But we didn't take the reality and psychology of Africa into account. *The Suns of Independence* was the first book of its kind to emphasize that Africa was partly to blame for its own plight. The lure of wealth and power had got the better of Africans. And, like everyone else, intellectuals thought only of lining their pockets." As he says this, Kourouma, who is a friendly giant of a man, bursts into a hearty laugh. "If *I* didn't yield to temptation," he says, "maybe it's only because I didn't have the opportunity!" ■

A working tool

For me, as a teacher, the *Courier* is a very useful working tool. The subjects you cover, with all their human aspects, interest my pupils and give me ideas for many of my personal projects. Congratulations on your "new format", with its short and clearly written articles which I find far more accessible to young readers.

Ylen Orrego
Valence, France

The granny boom

My name is Sasithorn. I enjoy reading the *UNESCO Courier*. After reading about old people in your December 1998 issue, I looked at my grandmother. I think I will take care of her and love her as much as myself.

Sasithorn,
a student from Thailand

The *Courier* on Internet

I am delighted to see that the *Courier* is now on Internet. Congratulations!

Valery Lysenko
Chernobyl, Ukraine

Glowing pictures

The photos illustrating each article are impressive and striking. Each issue of *UNESCO Courier* is a feast for the mind, the eyes and the imagination.

Prof. Capasso, Rector,
Otto Krauze Technical School No. 1,
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Sobriety and realism

We want to congratulate you on the new presentation of the *UNESCO Courier*. Its remarkable sobriety is a positive feature, enabling readers to get an immediate grasp of the topic being covered. I found particularly memorable the poignant beauty and tragic realism of the photos of Russian miners that appeared in the November 1998 issue. The article that accompanied the photos depicted a world of total wretchedness, whose existence I had hitherto unsuspected.

Julie Corseaux,
Villejuif, France

The green light

You take a constructive approach to social and environmental problems. When will people learn the reflex that whenever a tree is felled another should be planted? When will there be a "decade for trees"? When will taxes on industry be paid directly to the ministry of the environment? When will we learn?

Jaime and Dauphine Giraldo
Lain, France

The vanishing heritage

We commend the conscientious courage you show in publishing articles highlighting offences against human dignity and against the natural environment on which we all depend. But we miss two features which seem to have disappeared: Greenwatch and Heritage.

Michael and Elizabeth Rochester
St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

The environment and the heritage still receive regular coverage, but in somewhat different form. The environment is covered in the "Planet" feature, and "Signs of the Times" regularly presents heritage-related topics. Editor

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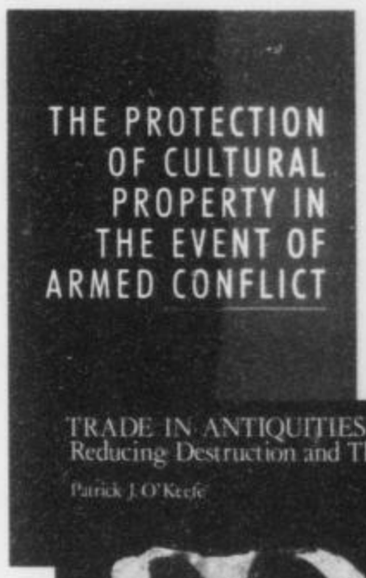

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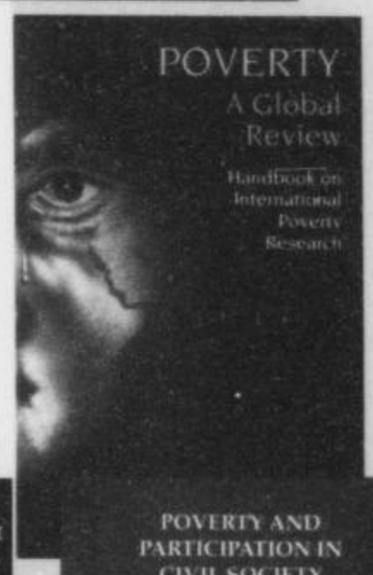

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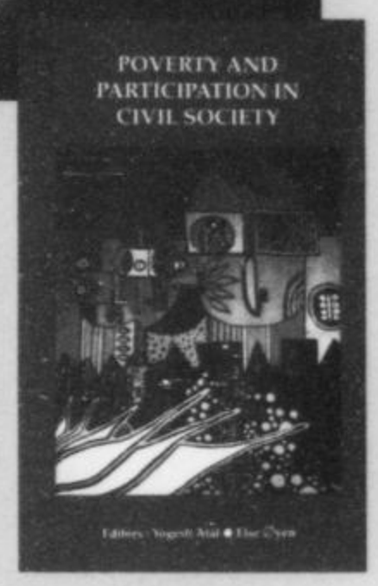

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- Community radio: neighbours taking the mike
- Interview with Palestinian envoy Leïla Shahid

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